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Coming To

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COMING TO

by

Kate E. Spies

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English)

The Honors College

University of Maine

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Coming to aims to explore the power of voice and personal narrative in engaging with experiences different from one's own. The project was triggered by personal analysis and exploration within the genre of personal nonfiction; looking at the way that texts within this field engage with and draw us closer to different cultures, communities, and experiences through authorial presence and strong narrative voice. *Coming to* attempts to embody these characteristics within a creative piece. It focuses on my experience with a fellow honors student, Daniella Runyambo. Daniella is a student originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The piece endeavors to capture both of our stories, and primarily the personal change catalyzed within me throughout my time with Daniella.

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**On Deciding to Swim:
An Artist's Statement for *Coming to***

The nascent ideas I had about my thesis project all centered on certain texts. I had E.B. White's essays running through my head, Annie Dillard's passages from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *An American Childhood*, excerpts from Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* ("First of all: I am tired. I am true of heart! And also: You are tired. You are true of heart!"). And I thought about the new kind of intrigue that I felt when sitting in my creative nonfiction class in the fall, as I listened to my classmates read essays about their great aunts or their childhood or the way they felt about their dogs. We read the *Best American Essays of 2013* for that class, and I read the assigned passages but couldn't stop myself from reading the rest of them, too — swallowed them all down in the way that you eat an oyster, because they were too engaging to help it.

So when I began to think about what I'd want to spend my senior year exploring for this last, cumulative project, my head filled up with these pieces that had come to feel the most powerful to me. I was drawn to their craftsmanship. The writing was vibrant and creative: White's wielding of adjectives, Eggers' gutsy and surprising metaphors, Dillard's use of detail. But I was just as captivated by the subject matter of my favorite pieces and by the topics that we grappled with in my nonfiction class. It was all the stuff of humans: memories, relationships, transitions, the poignancy and the awkwardness of growing up, the way that a certain place can make you feel. No tremendous adventures, really. White wrote a whole essay — "Summer Catarrh" — about pollen and his nose. But the writing I was most drawn to was honest and intimate and therefore felt important to me, even if it dealt in the everyday, because it pulled me closer to understanding another person's world

and also my own. I carried certain lines around with me like they were heads-up pennies I'd found in a parking lot, because they captured an exact emotion or thought that I'd experienced, too, in a way so true that it felt surprising and almost lucky.

Professor Roiland has shown me texts that do this same kind of work. He's also pointed me to essays that articulate *how* and *why* this kind of writing is important, more cogently than the compliments that accumulate in my head whenever I read my favorites: *This is so good. This writing is so good!* These essays place a finger on what — really — keeps me reading and re-reading personal nonfiction.

One such analysis is Leslie Jamison's essay, "How to Write a Personal Essay," in which Jamison, author of the personal essay collection *The Empathy Exams*, discusses her approach to personal writing and the question: "How can the confession of personal experience create something that resonates beyond itself?" I point to Jamison's last line: "There is so much outside the false cloister of private experience; and when you write, you do the work of connecting that terrible privacy to everything beyond it." This sentence elucidates what I feel about personal narrative and why I think it's significant: writing and reading this kind of literature is a connective act. Sharing personal memories or thoughts or emotions by writing about them is another way to swing a hammer at the barriers that divide us, that shield our internal experience from one another. Writing also maybe makes the burden of this personal life — what we carry around in our hearts and heads — a little more widely shouldered. Anyone reading about an author's growth or pain or hope is also someone with his or her own private depths and interior grappling, who can relate and connect with the author's experience. And so this kind of expression creates connections

that extend outward from a single individual. Jamison calls these links “messy threads” and I picture them, also, as sticky, as able to stretch and adhere to many people.

Jamison uses *terrible* in discussing the privacy of individual experience. It really is the most fitting word to tie to this kind of internal life and the ultimate act of laying it bare — terrible in that the process of wrestling with and then sharing inner thoughts can be scary, in that exposure and confession through writing can be raw, can maybe shove the author out into a space that can feel open and unguarded and unsafe.

White and Dillard lower their legs and hips down into this realm of honesty, this genre of confessional writing that is like a Maine tidal bay. “Maine bay” because I feel like the act of diving into our stretch of the Atlantic and the act of writing good nonfiction are similar: for both, there is first an icy and uneasy chill, and then a furtive glance back, before the determined hiking up of swim trunks/sleeves and then finally the plunging in, the complete commitment. At some distinct point a decision has to be made to get wet, to snuff out the twinge of uneasiness that comes from either the first arctic touch of Maine waters or one’s initial wrestling with honest, personal expression.

But in my head I tie *terribleness* also to strength, to something big and important and strong, in the same way that I think the Minotaur was also probably terrible (a fearsome people-eater, but also impressively powerful, with those great and nasty bull horns). And this element of *terrible* is just as applicable to narrative nonfiction as its element of scariness. Personal narrative can be influential, can be powerful in a big way because of the connections and the “messy threads” that it generates between writers and readers.

In his *One Man's Meat* essay, "The Wave of the Future," E.B. White sticks us in the passenger seat of his truck as he waits outside his doctor's office in Waterville, Maine on a December afternoon in 1940. He turns to us and tells us about his feelings on the Second World War: "I think democracy ... is the most futuristic thing I ever heard of, and that it holds everything hopeful there is, because 'demos' means people and that's what I am for, and whatever Nazi means it doesn't mean people, it means 'the pure-bred people,' which is a contemptible idea to build a new order on" (167). White's in the second year of the war, here. The young men in his town have crossed the Atlantic to fight. He's installed black curtains over the windows of his farmhouse in case of German air raids. For this moment, sitting in his truck, we are privy to his musings and through them pulled back to this charged period in our nation's history in an immediate and real way.

A few paragraphs later, White says: "And when I went in at last to the doctor's office and was admitted I still was thinking about these matters and felt low in my spirits and spent, and it was the first time I had seen this doctor but he didn't look at me but just said: 'What's the matter?'" This historical link — White's insight on the changing and war-affected world around him and the meaning of democracy — is made real and believable because it is a pebble he places, naturally, amidst the flow of his daily life. The broader context that White is a part of becomes palpable due to the presence of everyday details, like the stoic greeting of his doctor and the way he sits in his truck along the curb, thinking, before his appointment.

White dips into this genre of personal divulgence and through it opens up a space for our presence in an earlier period. But I've been waking up to the greater resonance of narrative nonfiction that Jamison explores in "How to Write a Personal Essay" through the

texts that Professor Roiland has shared. And these are essays like Jamison's own, "The Empathy Exams," or David Foster Wallace's "Getting Away from Already Pretty Much Being Away from It All," and "Consider the Lobster," or John Jeremiah Sullivan's "Upon this Rock," "My Debt to Ireland," "Mister Lytle," "The Last Wailer," and "Feet in Smoke," or Ariel Levy's "Thanksgiving in Mongolia," or Jo Ann Beard's "Fourth State of Matter," or Joan Didion's "Goodbye to All That" (the list persists). White wades up to his belly button into the bay of personal writing. But these authors tread in the deep currents, climb back onto shore soaking wet just to yell something defiant before cannonballing back in again.

They write about their parents, their children, their mentors, their brothers — wrestle with the intimate and powerful and sometimes tangled relationships that have shaped them. Conversely, White doesn't name his wife or son throughout the entirety of *One Man's Meat*; they flit in and out of his writing as only "my wife" or "the boy." He's often commenting on the exterior environment he is a part of: his farm, his town, his nation. Didion and Sullivan and Wallace and all the rest also write about their contexts, but at the same time they turn their attention markedly inwards. Their writing grants us interiority: we learn about their childhoods, what they think about God, what they learned by living in certain places and by taking certain trips, what it felt like when they had a miscarriage or got an abortion or had heart surgery. And they explore their own intimate details to better understand what it means to be human.

I'll show and not tell. My favorite essay, John Sullivan's "Feet in Smoke," is about the near-death encounter and the ultimate recovery of Sullivan's brother, Worth, after he was electrocuted. The topic sounds morbid, but the whole piece is unexpectedly beautiful.

Sullivan records the experiences he shares with Worth as he emerges from a coma and regains his memory, functionality, and personality in his hospital room. He writes:

“I can't imagine anything more hopeful or hilarious than having a seat at the spectacle of my brother's brain while it reconstructed reality. Like a lot of people, I'd always assumed, in a sort of cut-rate Hobbesian way, that the center of the brain, if you could ever find it, would inevitably be a pretty dark place, that whatever is good or beautiful about being human is a result of our struggles against everything innate, against physical nature. My brother changed my mind about all that ... it was a good place to be, you might even say a poetic place. He had touched death, or death had touched him, but he seemed to find life no less interesting for having done so” (2).

This is the purpose of the whole time that we spend with Sullivan next to Worth's hospital bed. This is the bottom line that gives sharpness to the rest of his paragraphs: here is Sullivan's personal pain, experience, and his individual relationship with Worth stretching out from the page to touch the reader, to connect to something inside all of us. He explores the aftermath of his brother's accident to comment on the human conditions that we all share; we are multi-layered beings who change and grow and learn more about ourselves and each other within a brief time that's destined to end, that could be extinguished or altered at any point. We are intricate creatures but also expendable. Electrocute-able. But “Feet in Smoke” suggests a kind of basal beauty that's a part of being human, too. Worth's accident confirms our mortality, but Sullivan also shows us how Worth's experience demonstrates the marvel of living within this transience; even after nearly losing it, his brother regains life in a beautiful and didactic kind of way.

And so Sullivan's personal narrative exercises the functionality that Jamison outlines in “How to Write a Personal Essay”: “If you honor the complexity of your own life,” she writes, “if you grant us entry into moments that hold shame or hurt or heat, and if you're willing to follow that heat, to feel out where all the small fires burn, then your

readers will trust you. They'll find flashes of themselves" (1). Sullivan follows his own heat — his brother's brush with death — and grants us entry into it, lets us sit in the hospital room as he watches Worth re-learn how to live. Sullivan's personal musings ("I can't imagine anything more hopeful ...") are intimate but they also relate to his readers' own human conditions. And so his words generate the larger resonance that Jamison describes.

Writers like Sullivan swallow their pride and embarrassment and fear and, as Jamison suggests, honor the complexity of their interior lives. These writers fan the fires; they write with honesty and intimacy and so spark the author-reader relationship into a meaningful blaze. I come full circle and answer my own musings —“Why? What about these texts keep me coming back, keep me thinking about them?”— by echoing Jamison: when writing is done this way, it's connective, it's meaningful, its depth touches our own depths. These texts keep us catching sight of our own faces and hearts as if they are littered with shards of mirror.

Understanding the strength of this kind of writing — catching sight of myself while reading Jamison, Sullivan, Wallace and others — has led me to my own nonfiction project. I've endeavored to express the personal change that I've experienced in my last two years at the University of Maine, which was triggered by two people: Mimi Killinger and Daniella Runyambo.

I met Mimi when I was a sophomore. She is the Rezendes Preceptor for the Arts for the Honors College, and she taught my second-year Honors sections. Mimi reached out to me at a time when I think I was floundering. I was struggling to find a niche in my new environment, but I was also submerged in an anxiety related to the weight I gave the ideas

of success and approval. I didn't quite know how to address the relationship I had with myself, or really to value that relationship in a healthy way. I was thinking a lot about external-Kate — what was thought of her and if she was doing well and if she was honoring the people that meant the most to her in the right ways. And so I was getting in my own way. Mimi connected with me over the summer after my sophomore year about an essay contest she thought I might be interested in. We started meeting about that project when I returned as a junior. Tuesdays at 2:00 pm. She sat across from me and looked me in the eye when I spoke and listened to me with such a powerful sincerity that it made me adjust the value I placed on my thoughts and my capability.

For that essay project I decided to explore the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which I'd had an interest in since high school. To that end, Mimi connected me to Daniella Runyambo in October of my junior year. Daniella is a Biology student at the University of Maine. She's a refugee from the DRC; she grew up affected by the same instability and tribal tensions I read about for my project with Mimi. We began meeting every week throughout that fall, and I collected her oral history.

But the time I have spent interviewing and collaborating with Daniella has given me something fiercely weightier than the factual information I used for that first essay. Daniella has woken me up to the way that I am a piece of a global community. And we have been learning together about the power of dialogue and listening in catalyzing empowerment.

The relationships I developed with Mimi and Daniella shoved me from a sphere of comfort that I had been dwelling in for a long time. They have taught me about the kind of

life I want to live, the kind of people I want to reflect in my own personhood and how to wholesomely do that.

And so my thesis project is, I think, also maybe an effort at taking a step towards this solidification of Kate, and towards honoring the things that good nonfiction does: honesty, connection, courage. The entire writing process has been my own halting attempt at plunging in, my own terrible swallowing of both cowardice and pride — in the same way that the Maine ocean demands your bravery if you really want to swim.

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Coming to

Every morning I wake up in buzzy static. I get stuck between dreaming and consciousness for a few seconds of scrabbling —*Where I am? What day is it?* — before I remember what the state of things are, whose cat is lightly squashing my chest.

* * *

On the morning of my high school cross country championships, I got caught in limbo between dreams and the day for longer than normal. Half a minute. And it was a deep, muddy well. My mind was thrashing around in it and I wasn't quite sure who the cat was yet and I was only aware of this subtle, rising panic about the day that was expanding inside of me like a balloon. Most of my brain was still thinking crazy dream things — giant chickens — but the small part that was awake got flooded by a foreboding about what was to come.

I finally surfaced and remembered who I was. I peeled sheets and nightmares off of my face and extracted the cat (mine) and slid out of bed. Stumbled through the bathroom and my bedroom to brush my teeth and pack my cross-country bag. But even as I gurgled mouthwash my chest kept tightening. An achy twinge seeped into my stomach. My head stayed hazy even though I shook it, tried to empty it of the wooziness of sleep.

I was thinking about the coming race, the way that I would line up on the starting line in a few hours with the other high-school runners and we would all tear off into the woods to try and beat each other. *How would I finish?* I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror with my cheeks full of mouthwash and I could only see two outcomes, really: ahead or behind, successfully or poorly. The whole thing felt very black and white, like a

chance to face myself, at last. I'd either meet the standards I had in my mind — a fast time, a top-ten finish — or I would fall short. I thought about my coach and my parents and the idea of failing in front of them, when they believed in me so fiercely, felt unacceptable.

The thing is: my parents were *always* spilling over with support, just as brimming with compliments and pride no matter how I competed in cross country. On poor days, when I stumbled across the finish line with a slower time, they'd howl "Amazing!" and "Go Kate!" in the same triumphant voices that they used when I won, too. The way that my mom would hug me and get my sweat all over herself was inevitable after every race — in the same way that you can rely on the sunrise. But this was my whole crux: they are entirely generous, unfailingly encouraging and always have been, and when I was younger I wrestled with how to reciprocate that. Doing well in athletics or academics began to feel like a concrete way of repaying the empathy that had been so ubiquitous in my household. Or at least, it was the only way that I could put my finger on.

So I started setting standards in my head. I outlined levels to strive for. And it became an entrenched habit, one that got bigger as I did; by high school, it became natural to expect success of myself and to be preoccupied by it, to carry around an anxiety about doing well in academics or in social situations or in athletics. I spent a lot of time thinking about the gaining of approval, how I was perceived. External Kate. As a teenager I came down with this kind of stupid sickness, this kind of crazy need to feel validated by things outside of myself.

Something like a race caused that anxiety to swell like a terrible tide. That morning of the championships I could feel it filling me up: gray water that rose somewhere beneath my eyeballs.

In front of the bathroom mirror, I pulled on the bright red silk uniform that Mt. Ararat cross-country runners had been donning for years and tried to breathe deep at the girl there in front of me, so officially-clad, but the truth was out: she was officially worked up, too.

* * *

A half-hour later I waited with my twin brother, Alex, and our other high school teammates on our school's wooded campus in Topsham, Maine. The other uniformed kids around me chattered to one another. It was another Saturday for them. Their skies were not falling. They bobbed to their iPods and slid on their sneakers and munched granola bars and then talked with their mouths full. One jokester stood in the middle of the road and scanned for the school bus that would take us to the race in Augusta, until my coach looked up and spotted him: "Tyler, get out of the road, you knucklehead!" But Tyler was unbeatable and dipped into a dramatic bow before sauntering back to safety.

I smelled the bus before I saw it. A great wind of gasoline and tire rubber came curling around the corner of the school. And then the yellow thing rolled fatly in front of me and we both groaned when we saw each other, the bus with its grumbly engine and me with my throat clogged with heart. And I was thinking wild things at it: *Scram! Get outta here, bus! Go back to where you came from!* Because the heart thumping in my tight chest didn't want the bus to be there, was too anxious about racing well to even *want* to race. Because: what if? What if I floundered and pulled up to the finish line

somewhere in the middle of the pack, or towards the end? That would be a letting-down on many fronts — a letting-down of my coach, who trained us so thoughtfully and carefully, a letting-down of my parents, a letting-down of myself. A large part of me wanted to avoid the whole thing rather than run the risk of bungling it.

But the bus ignored my pleas and stayed put, swung open its doors. I climbed aboard and dreamt secretly of flat tires.

Once we reached Augusta, my teammates and I piled off and pulled on our sweats and gathered in a big group to warm up. I just rubbernecked around. My eyes narrowed into little demon slits whenever I caught sight of another girl, wearing the blue or black or orange uniforms of the other mid-coast Maine high schools we'd be competing against: the enemies. I eyed the sinews of their legs, their high and curved ponytails, and it sent the balloon around my heart stretching even larger.

And at the starting line there were those faces in my head: my dad, the CEO and the marathon-runner, who got so excited about his twins' cross country races, and who has these large and gentle hands, and who, when he took us camping, would inevitably kneel down beneath some tree and cup his fingers around a tiny green plant and look up at us and say something like: "Wow! Look at this flowering trillium! I always think they look so beautiful this time of year," and would hand out other facts to us from his bottomless cache of nature wisdom. And I thought of my mom, the dental hygienist who knows how to make her patients feel at ease, and never forgets to ask about their families. And I thought of my running coach, Diane Fournier, who is fiercely stoic and stern — but who I also think believed in me, in the whole team, in exactly the same disciplined way that she approaches everything.

They are entirely human and imperfect. They make mistakes in the same way that I do. I knew this in high school. But I also knew how well they were at what they did for other people, and at what they did for me. And I wanted to honor them in some way and *do well* right back. But the seconds and miles before the finish line just felt like that limbo time I got stuck in before I really woke up: I got a sensation of being powerless, tried to swim up through my own head to see what was coming but got muddled by anxiety and lost perspective, scrabbled at the walls of that well. So when I raised my arms at the starting line and the gun went off and we all took off into the woods (battlefield), the balloon in my chest nearly popped.

It didn't. I lost the whirling in my head and nearly my footing as we formed one colorful stream of swinging arms and flapping uniforms and coursed out onto the trail. Like salmon we turned and dove down into the trees together as a single unit. And soon I could think only of the sound of my breathing, like the ragged sucking of a vacuum cleaner, and could only stare at the trees in front of me, and could only pad forward on legs starting to catch on fire. The trail rolled underneath me as something quieter and primal took over. Because the Kate at my core — unfettered by nerves — really does like running. I like the steady in and out of my breathing. I like how the pumping of my arms makes me feel secretly strong. As I passed the first mile marker I remembered all of this, because I was too tired, too dazed by the lactic acid building up in my body, to worry anymore. The faces in my head faded away. I passed the enemies.

And the end of the race was the same whole quelling, the same whole discovery of peace and reversal of anxiety that happened every time I finished well in a race, or, in that very same way, every time I got a good test grade, or when I met someone new or

when I talked to a teacher and it went better than I'd thought it would. These small victories made me feel like the external version of myself met the standards in my head. So this Augusta race was the very same rise and fall. The same scrabbling and filling chest and then — as I slurped water and cheered on the other finishers and kicked off my sneakers — the peeling-away of some foggy layer over my eyes, the deflation of the panic in my chest, the final waking-up.

* * *

It's weird and violent but I think about the way that certain things used to make me feel, like the agitation of that high school race day, and I keep getting this image from a video game that my brother plays — his favorite: "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare." When his little virtual man gets shot with a little virtual rocket blaster and he is bleeding pixels all over the place, Alex will click a button to deploy the contents of something called a "medic pack" and the soldier's wounds will seal up with a satisfying *ching!* sound and he will stop bleeding and will rise up to wage more war. I have been thinking maybe we have to learn to carry our own medic packs, to let that sort of healing and validation come from within even in the face of a B, or a poor race, or a new person.

Your own courage, your own self-regard, can pull you from limbo, can instill the kind of clarity that you get in the morning when you finally know yourself and also your cat.

* * *

The Augusta course of that race had all the features for a good cross-country fight: trees and fields and woods and an aching long hill riddled with pseudo-peaks (it twisted like a loamy snake towards the sky so at each turn you breathed a sigh of relief

that morphed into a curse). Dark evergreen trees stood like sentinels on either side of the finish line, adding shade and drama.

These are the same trees that make up the dense and pointed carpet of needles and fir that rolls through this mid-coast region of Maine, stretches 30 miles down to my hometown of Topsham where Mt. Ararat high school is, and then lines either side of the highway that runs south towards the coast. The carpet runs out after another 30 miles or so along there. It changes into a new and manmade forest; the pine gives way to brick apartment buildings, metal towers, parking garages, old stone domes, and cathedrals.

These buildings make up the sprawling of Portland. The city sits on the same stony coast that zigzags its way back up to Topsham and makes the whole state look like a broken shard of something.

From 2007 to 2010, when I was racing for Mt. Ararat and wearing my red uniform, there was another high-schooler — a year ahead of me — down the highway from me, among the locker-ed halls of Portland’s public high school, who was fighting her own kind of fight as I waged war on the faultless and the be-sneakered.

She is Daniella Runyambo, who now attends the University of Maine with me. Daniella grew up in the city of Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Her mother is from Rwanda and her father is Congolese. She’s a member of the Banyamulenge tribe, which is a subset of the larger ethnic group called “Tutsi.”

The Tutsi people make up one of the biggest populations in the Greater African Lakes region; they live in Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC. Ethnic tension between the Tutsi and the “Hutu” peoples has marred this region with violence: a large, thorny vine of Tutsi scapegoating has been growing all over Rwanda and the DRC since the countries

were initially formed. Hutu extremists killed approximately 800,000 Tutsi in the 1994 Rwandan genocide — what's estimated to be three quarters of the entire Tutsi population at that time. And the turmoil has continued to bubble since then; Daniella and her family were forced to flee Bukavu in 2004 due to rebel violence. They crossed the border into Rwanda where they lived for three years before moving across the ocean in 2007 to join the community of Congolese asylees living in Portland, on this fragmented coast.

Daniella is twenty-four this year, and she's finishing her fifth-year at the University of Maine. She is a Biology major, pre-med track. Sometimes she sits in her college apartment in Orono, Maine — 7,000 miles away from Bukavu — and Googles her tribe. She always finds the word “stateless” associated with the Banyamulenge. It makes her frown. The tribe is still victim to the rebel violence that pulses in the southeastern DRC. Most of the Banyamulenge are now totally scattered: in the refugee camps in Burundi, Kenya, or Rwanda, or as official citizens in other African countries, or across the Atlantic, like Daniella's family.

Daniella left instability and violence and hatred for a new home in Maine but her first years in Portland came with their own kind of statelessness. School was a dusty, dry ground, and she was like this tree, flower — stretching and prodding tendrils within that soil to find some footing, to root out and find firmness. But bad soil offers only pebbles — not water - that stunt small and green things, stops flowers from opening.

Bad soil because Daniella took a national exam when she attended a secondary school in Rwanda — her intermediate home between Bukavu and Portland — and she received the highest grade of anyone in her school. However, when she started at Portland as a sophomore she was placed in a math class that attempted to teach her the

sum of $1 + 1$ (she already knew pre-calculus). Even when she was an upperclassman at Portland her Advanced Placement Biology teacher continually asked her how she'd managed to enroll in his class —“I don't even understand how you are taking this class,” he'd tell her, like he couldn't believe she'd been allowed to sign up and that she was able to keep up with the material (she was). So: dry ground, bad dirt.

In Africa, Daniella grew up liking school. She was driven to learn: she had this clear vision of what she wanted to do with it. She walked around with images of her father, who had practiced as a medical doctor at one of the largest hospitals in the DRC when she was growing up.

On school vacations when she was young, he'd taken her to the hospital to visit his patients and watch him work. And she still hasn't forgotten the way that those patients looked: some of them had walked for miles and miles to the hospital just so they could be treated. They would be waiting outside the door when Daniella and her father arrived — sometimes entirely exhausted, sometimes with broken arms or bad injuries, sometimes feeble and depleted from malaria or polio.

And Daniella remembers how, when she would leave for school in the morning, she would sometimes have to squeeze herself past sick and injured people who were waiting on the doorstep of her family home, too: “They were waiting for my dad to see them,” she said. “They knew at the end of the day he would come.”

Through these moments, she began to link the idea of being a doctor to the idea of helping people. She noticed the role that her father had in their community: he was a helper, a healer, a mender — someone who could directly address the problems that people needed fixing. And as she grew up and went through primary and secondary

school in Africa, Daniella found that the subjects of math and science came naturally to her. She was a Biology whiz; she liked unraveling the way that things worked. On many fronts, becoming a doctor began to feel like her destiny.

But in Portland, the administrators of the English as a Second Language Program that Daniella was placed in didn't really expect her or the other asylees to excel. Even her teachers seemed to forget she was a *real individual*, with hopes and goals and plans. She got overlooked.

There was this one afternoon, after school had ended for the day and desks were empty: Daniella had stayed behind her last class to finish some work. She was scribbling away on her assignment when one of her teachers came into the room where she was sitting. He had a middle-school student at his side who was considering playing football for Portland High School — Portland has a couple of private schools besides its public one. Daniella's teacher was giving him a tour of the facilities, telling him about the programs the school offered, the strength of the academics. Blah blah. And then Daniella heard him spill out this loathsome sentence, this appalling *confession*. He said, "It's true that we do have a lot of immigrant students at this school who are just not as good."

Daniella looked up. She saw the visiting student glance uncomfortably over at her. But Daniella's teacher caught the glance and just nodded in her direction and said, "Oh, she's fine." He was wholly unfazed. Just gave that little jerk of his head and then led the student out of the room to continue his tour.

Daniella tells me today: "Little things like that made me think."

She was often passed over in this way. Daniella didn't exactly learn what a grade point average was until she was a sophomore at the University of Maine. No one had bothered to tell her.

"I'm not blaming them," Daniella says of the ESL administrators, "I was fortunate enough to get an education. But I needed someone to hear me out, not just generalize everybody. I understand why you would do that, but if you can't hear me out, you won't learn."

Daniella found ways to rally against the way that the international students were lumped together and underestimated. She figured out how to sign up for classes on her own, so that she could help the other ESL students register for the courses that they wanted to take. And she signed herself up for classes that she knew she could handle even when others doubted it. As an upperclassman she took Advanced Placement courses. She was the only junior amidst the seniors grappling with anatomy class.

But by the end of her time in Portland, Daniella found herself fighting more and learning less, she was so caught up in helping other students navigate the apathy that had marked her own experience.

* * *

Daniella officially became stateless because of something that happened in her first city. Bukava is a 23-mile wide metropolis in the southeastern edge of the DRC. She lived there with her brothers, sisters, and parents until she was 13.

On the afternoon of May 27th, 2004, Daniella heard her name being called through the streets of her neighborhood. These loud and desperate cries of "Daniella! Daniella!" came up through her window.

The calls had cut through silence that hung, heavily, in a room that shouldn't have been hushed. A room that should have been boisterous instead of tense. Daniella's family and friends — brothers, sisters, neighbors, cousins, her mother and father, more than a dozen people total — sat huddled in the main room of their family home.

Earlier in the day there had been laughter in that room, all the bustling one would expect from the passing and cuddling of baby cousins, the rough housing of brothers, the cooking and feeding orchestrated by mothers. Daniella's father had arrived at noon from a trip to Rwanda — he'd gone to attend a funeral there — and he'd brought with him some of Daniella's uncles and aunts, and friends of the family. They'd ate, hugged, visited with each other after being a country apart.

But, for months, there had been swirling this storm of anger outside of the Runyambo's walls; the dissonance between the Hutu and Tutsi peoples of the DRC and Rwanda hadn't disappeared after the 1994 Tutsi genocide.

As Tutsis, the Banyamulenge had been specifically targeted in the genocide. Many fled to Rwanda once it came under Tutsi control. Rumors germinated: rebel groups disseminated the idea that the Banyamulenge *belonged* in Rwanda. They shouted, "Go back to Rwanda!" at them in the streets of Bukavu — though the Banyamulenge have lived in the DRC since the 1600s.

Earlier in 2004, rebel groups had dragged four Banyamulenge university students into a crowded intersection in Bukavu, undressed them, tied them together, and beat them to death. They threw the four bodies in a nearby field.

The violence and anger had been picking up the way that a thunderstorm on a lake in the summer does. And the pressure finally broke: rebel militia invaded Bukavu at 3 pm that day.

Daniella first heard explosions: loud cracks from across the city. Then, men's voices up their street.

Daniella knew they were strangers: "We heard people speaking our language," she said, "but they were also speaking other languages." She couldn't understand what they were saying, just heard this loud jabbering of men talking back and forth. The voices came closer until they were only walls away, just outside the Runyambo's home.

The men had machetes, and Daniella's family beg to pray quietly. These broad blades are often the choice weapons of the rebel groups that headquarter in the African bush: they're effective tools for maiming and disfiguring victims. They spread fear. They lead to suffering. Daniella silently asked that the men also had guns. "If I was going to be killed," Daniella said, "I'd rather have been shot."

And then there was only anguished waiting as her city burned and the men prowled outside the door. Her youngest sister, Lydia, was only a year old at the time — didn't even know to be scared, as her parents and siblings bowed their heads and hoped for guns.

How jarring then, to hear these loud and anxious calls of "Daniella!" being volleyed up from the street. Daniella didn't understand. She thought: "Do they know my name? How do the rebels know my name?"

Daniella's father peered outside. Her uncle was in the street, along with two of his friends who were Congolese national soldiers. They'd brought guns to counter the curved

metal of the rebels and drive them away. It was one of the soliders — Michelle — crying out for Daniella. She knew him, knew many of the soldiers; she had grown up sitting with them in Bukavu. She liked to visit their posts and tell them jokes and make them laugh. And Michelle was here and he'd brought a gun and he'd remembered her, shook them all from their tormented waiting with these shouts of her name. His presence was the first sign of their saving.

Daniella left her home jammed into the front cab of a truck alongside fifteen other people. And two girls lay in the back — they pressed themselves flat against the bed, to avoid bullets.

Bukavu was only thirty minutes or so from the border of Rwanda. But it was long enough for Daniella to see things she won't forget— she remembers a man who had stayed behind in the chaos to loot a liquor store. He'd been attacked by a machete and lay sprawled on the ground, bleeding. He was “like, not really dead yet, but almost,” Daniella said. There was a case of booze next to him — a poor prize in the bloody dirt.

By that evening, Daniella was a refugee alongside the 3,000 other people who had fled Bukavu that day. The Runyambos were lucky; because Daniella's mother was from Rwanda, they had family and lodging across the border in the city of Kamembe. Most of their Bukavu neighbors joined the swarms of displaced people living in the refugee camps along the border, where their homes were tents and their meals were meager rations.

Camps like these in Burundi, the DRC, and Rwanda had been filled with refugees during the 1994 genocide. They had been spawning grounds for cholera, malaria, rampant intestinal diseases, and waves of violence. Both Hutu and Tutsi extremists

groups had attacked various camps following the genocide; the camps were easy targets, with their flimsy tents that housed masses of potential victims. An estimated 50,000 refugees were killed through this violence or by disease in 1994.

In 2007, when Daniella's neighbors were forced to settle in the Rwandan camps, there was nothing stopping rebel Hutus from repeating the pattern and following them across the border, machetes in tow.

But because Daniella's family moved in with Daniella's aunt in Kamembe, they sidestepped the sickness and violence of the camps entirely. Daniella's father recognized the fortune his family had in having connections across the border. He wanted his children to understand this, as well, and he wanted them to recognize the fact that their lives had been unquestionably altered. This wasn't just a visit with their aunt, he told them; they had been forced from their homes, and their lives would never be the same. They'd had their own country torn away from them. So on certain days he would take them to the camps to line up for rations alongside the other refugees. Daniella would wait in a long throng of people to get a piece of bread, a bowl of soup.

"My Dad wanted us to know that we couldn't just settle in this new country," Daniella said, "I wondered why we had to go to the camps. Now I understand the value of it, because I was a refugee in that country. That was me *fleeing my country*. The whole thing was real. Everything was real."

The city Daniella left behind in May continued to suffer bouts of violence for the rest of that summer of 2004. Two renegade Congolese commanders, Laurent Nkunda and Jules Mutebutsi, took control of Bukavu on June 2nd from the Hutu rebels. These commanders claimed that they were intervening on behalf of the city's people. They

stated publicly that they wanted the Banyamulange killings to end. But Nkunda and Mutebutsi and their men killed citizens and carried out widespread sexual violence and looting from June 2nd to June 8th. A local human rights organization, “Justice for All,” kept a list of the human rights violations that swept Bukavu during the commanders’ brief reign: 100 people killed, 617 women and girls raped, 254 citizens wounded by bullets, 60 vehicles stolen. The central bank was entirely looted of its reserves. On June 9th, the national army finally retook Bukavu, and it was stabilized.

But this only shoved the renegade commanders aside to smaller surrounding towns, where they carried on pillaging and raping. And rebel militias continued to train and grow in the surrounding bush around Bukavu. Moreover, by the end of June, anyone who wanted to leave the DRC to find safety in Rwanda simply couldn’t. That summer the Congolese government had accused Rwandan officials of supporting the rebels who had stormed Bukavu. On June 6th, in an angry outrage, the Rwandan government had closed its border with the DRC — ten days after the Runyambos had crossed it to safety.

In Rwanda, Daniella’s family lived in Kamembe for a month before moving to the nation’s capital of Kigali so that the children could attend school there.

Daniella took physics and chemistry for the first time in Kigali. She aced them. She completed eighth grade, and then ninth. But in 2007, when she was sixteen, her parents had made a decision. They had been asking themselves, “Do we keep being ‘somebody’ here in Rwanda, and living this way? Or do we become a ‘nobody’ in the United States but allow our children to have opportunities, and an education?” Daniella said.

Ultimately, they chose their children. Daniella's parents had friends who had recently moved to Maine. There was a growing community of Congolese asylees living in Portland, as the city was becoming more and more attractive to people like the Runyambos; it offered public housing, a range of employment opportunities, multicultural community centers, and translation and ESL services. Portland was also characterized by a sense of security, a small town pace and low crimes rates unlike the other — albeit warmer — cities that refugees were moving to, like Los Angeles or Houston.

Daniella's father looked ahead and looked back: a past as a medical doctor, as a distinguished healer and community member, to a future that was marred by a language barrier, an inability to use his medical license and a stripping of his identity, a departure into a kind of anonymity. But he'd looked around at his present, too — his daughters and sons — and they crossed the Atlantic in 2007 to this different world, at the edge of a pine carpet and splintered coast.

Daniella made friends of all backgrounds in Portland. She learned English. And she scrabbled at the dry ground of her high school, pushed her tendrils of hope and determination past the pebbles. As a senior, she knew she wanted to go to college. She applied to the University of Maine.

Those trees I ran through in Augusta — Daniella would drive northward through them in 2010, to Orono.

* * *

I took that same route, too — up 295 — a year after her. On an afternoon in the August of 2011, my parents sat in the front seats of our car and switched through the

radio channels to find National Public Radio and I looked out the back window as my red house was swallowed by a lip of ground. There was a pair of flip-flops that my mom had gotten me a few weeks before (“for the dorm showers!”) on the seat next to me.

Something about those shoes — their *plasticness*, and the way that they were the exact green of a jaundiced Kermit — just made me totally unhinged. My mind reeled: *Why was I going to a place where I needed to wear SHOES in the shower?* It was an idea so wholly the opposite of *home*.

We wound through the heart of my hometown of Topsham and then drove along the road that leads into 295. Eventually I turned away from the window when the view became unfamiliar, when I stopped seeing all the buildings and houses that made up the area that I grew up in. I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them and folded my face against the gray lining of the back seat. It smelled sterile. Garrison Keillor’s voice wafted through the car (in the way that it wafts) but I couldn’t focus on anything. My stomach was roiling, like I had eaten a bucket of lava — hot and thick and heavy and bubbling. I wanted to burp and also to cry. And I could feel the gray tide of panic rising up through my chest, up around my lungs and towards my mouth, making it a little hard to breathe. As I closed my eyes against the seat and we kept driving further and further away, I felt strained and pulled and taut, like someone had tied a string between my ponytail and the peak of our red house.

The entire trip was the biggest rise yet, beyond any pre-race mania or the jitters I felt about my grades in high school. And I think the final quelling of this anxiety has been a long time coming; it’s taken me a while to come down from the swell of agitation that I rode in on when I first arrived at UMaine. It took grappling with myself and learning

from particular people to gain perspective, to clip the strand between my head and my home, to officially wake up, to compile my own medic pack.

That first week that I came to campus in late August wasn't actually for classes; I had seven days of pre-season training with the cross-country team before the semester officially started. We all stayed in our captain's apartment and ran on the school trails to prepare for the season.

That week was miserable but it's because I made it that way. The older girls on the team were exceedingly friendly; they took all the freshmen out for ice cream our first night, told us everything to expect about competing for the team, asked about our hometowns and our families and what we wanted to study. By the end of the first evening, post sundaes, I liked them all tremendously. But I got stuck in a phase similar to the hazy one I wake up in; I got inundated with worry. I became anxious about gaining their approval and *doing well* and connecting with them. And I made myself sick about the running because I wanted to prove myself there, too, especially because I had a new coach watching from the sidelines.

Most of that week I was fixated on what external Kate seemed like to everyone. I had a hard time being the version of myself that I am when I feel known and approved of — because no one *knew* that Kate. And so I was quiet rather than risk making a mistake, rather than risk becoming disliked.

But there was this one moment when I forgot my defenses: the whole girl's team stayed up late on the Wednesday night of that pre-season week. We sat in a big circle on the floor of my captain's apartment. Someone dimmed the lights. And then we carried out a tradition that is upheld every year among the cross country women at UMaine: we went

around the circle and voted for the member of the boy's team we liked the most — for his demeanor, speed, hair, admirable muscles, etc. In this way, the most eligible XC bachelor is named in secret each year. Some rare men have held the title their entire four years of college.

On that Wednesday night I got caught up in the goofiness and forgot for a second to worry about the external version of myself. When it came to my turn, and everyone was waiting for my answer, I blurted out the silly thought that was in my head into the silence: “I choose Ryan because he seems like a sexy bad boy.”

The room exploded. Everyone started guffawing from deep in their guts. People keeled over, clutching their stomachs. My captain howled, “Kate! Oh my gosh, you like bad boys?! You're so quiet and shy!” And I just shrugged and was like: “Yeah, I like Ryan's tattoos.” And that sent them all rollicking again, and I got this warmth in my stomach because I'd been my raw, goofy self for a moment and it had gone okay.

The girls made jokes about bad boys the rest of that evening. But by the time we were all settling into bed I'd already slipped back into my guarded state. Anxiety came too naturally around people I wasn't close with. So after this small and thrilling excursion, I slid back into my shell.

Ryan won, by the way.

* * *

My parents came back to the UMaine campus the Sunday after pre-season to help me move into my dorm. Their car was loaded with the rest of my stuff, winter clothes and books and posters from my corner room in our red house. It was the final severing.

When they arrived in the late afternoon we made the long lug to my fourth floor dorm room. I rifled through all the boxes and lifted out the folder of photographs and letters I'd saved just for this moment, and I plastered the bare, stucco walls of my dorm with the faces of my high school friends and my family and images of a happy and known Kate. Because I could very much feel myself forgetting who that was, in this new space where no one knew me, where I was scrabbling and feeling that tightness in my chest but was also wholly unanchored, had no Coach Fournier to blow her whistle at me and no best friends to ruffle my hair and laugh when I worried.

And I was just starting to choke on this idea, and was staring determinedly at all my pasted pictures to stop myself from crying, when my parents set down the last boxes and swooped in for hugs and left.

* * *

A few weeks later I finished another day of classes and walked up the stairs to that dorm room. I lived on a floor with other students in the Honors College. They had an easy friendliness and held game and movie nights in our common room. A blonde one who always nodded hello at me came down the stairs as I was going up and said: "We're going to see the play on campus tonight if you'd like to join!"

I said: "Oh, thanks!" and smiled back at her.

But when I got to my room and began unloading my backpack I started to get a little breathless, a little flighty, and that hazy state filled my head. I thought about how these kids didn't really know me, and how their approval wasn't something I could control or guarantee and there was a chance I might not *do well*.

I heard some of my neighbors gathering out in the hallway beyond my door, chattering about the play — “Wait, how do we get there again?” (freshmen).

I balked. I turned away from the door and instead spent the night Skyping with my best friend from Mt. Ararat, Genny, who had just started school at New York University. We talked for hours – reminiscing, describing our new days apart and our new places. I began to remember a little bit about who I am when I am not worried, because, in front of Genny, I felt like I didn’t have to fret about making mistakes or gaining her approval; we have a ten-year friendship, know each other’s quirks like they are our own. When we talked that evening I didn’t question myself.

After we said goodbye, and I’d closed my laptop and was left alone in an empty room, those feelings drained out of my body. The hallway outside was quiet. I slipped into its darkness and walked toward the bathroom with the flip-flops under my arm. At this point, they were the color of a Kermit who was both rotting and jaundiced; their bottoms were all black. I really did need to wear them. The showers were vile.

* * *

I muddled through the rest of that year playing it safe in exactly this way. I escaped through Skype and phone calls, sat on my hands in class, kept my chin tucked into my chest, ran the pads of my fingers along the ink of the letters taped to my walls.

I took an array of classes that 2011-2012 year, mostly general education requirements and a couple of Honors courses, which were small, challenging, and my favorite. Early in the spring semester, my parents asked if I’d thought more about declaring a major, but I was deep in that state of anxiety that is so much like the buzzy static I wake up in. I had a hard time stepping back and looking ahead.

“I’m still not sure,” I told them.

* * *

Then it was summer again.

I found myself in these dream-like moments:

Here! Here I was in the middle of a May night asleep in my own true room, with my cat curled like a giant snail on the pillow next to me. And she was purring like an outboard motor and I was purring figuratively. And she was the very opposite of shower flip-flops.

Here I was towards the end of May, sitting on a yellow couch in the basement of my friend Micaela’s house. We looked at old pictures and she told embarrassing stories of the way we were in middle school.

And here, on a Saturday in the first week of June, my two closest friends and I together at last: Genny and my other best friend, Chloe, and I sat in the deep grass of Genny’s Bowdoinham backyard. There was an auburn pile of dog dripping drool into my lap. I scratched golden-retriever ears as we talked about our freshman years. Chloe at Wellesley, Genny at NYU, and me in Maine.

When it was my turn to talk about UMaine, I found myself shutting down. I didn’t want to mar this golden evening — an evening I’d waited nine months for — with all the uneasy feelings that bubbled and scraped when I thought about the submissive version of myself that I left up there. That Kate crackled with anxiety. She was unanchored and unknown both to herself and to others.

* * *

I *do* know, on that June night in Bowdoinham, with that dog, with those friends, that my heart felt like a branch on an apple tree in fall — just laden with happiness, just goddamn heavy with it.

On that evening we still had the whole summer in front of us. We were rich with time. We stopped talking about college and talked about what we were going to do with our days and evenings and weekends: jobs, internships, beach adventures, sleepovers, and long runs along our favorite trails.

In high school, the three of us had been involved in sports and extracurricular clubs. We'd spent a lot of time volunteering for the National Honors Society together. Chloe and I had been deeply involved in the Mt. Ararat Garden Club; we'd built compost bins together during our last summer as high schoolers to collect vegetable waste from the school kitchen. So we were used to spending time together working on things and having projects to be a part of.

But also, you know: we were young college kids! We had been to the places of higher learning and had returned to our hometowns to unite our brainpower and make a difference and also to paint our toenails. We were women who liked being involved, but I think we were also feeling big and powerful and comfortable coming back to this familiar tiny town, surrounded by familiar people.

So someone brought up the idea of *doing something* with our months of golden time — like, working together on our own project of some sort.

“What are we all interested in?” Chloe had asked.

Genny spoke up about the conflicts in Rwanda and the DRC. As high school sophomores, Genny and I had researched the violence in the Great Lakes Region for

individual projects we'd had to do in our European history class. Genny had studied the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. I had done a project on the tribal tension in the DRC. After this class, the two of us had both developed an interest in the region. It had become another topic to share with each other; as juniors and seniors we pointed out articles, told each other about radio segments we'd listened to about Africa.

So we talked with Chloe about what we knew: how there was increasing instability in the DRC that was characterized by guerrilla warfare, incredible violence, rape, and the use of child soldiers. We remembered articles we'd read about teenagers being gang-raped by rebels in the bush, about young children being beaten in public. About the use of machetes.

We really did care. We were serious. Though I don't blame anyone for being skeptical; the whole scene was entirely incongruous with our subject matter. We were three privileged white girls sitting cross-legged in summer grass so green that it looked like it was being lit underneath by a stage light — and we were trying to talk about tribal warfare in the DRC and what we could do about it. We were all wearing sundresses. And we were saying things like: “Yes, I read about how the rebel groups recruit young teenage boys to act as cheap soldiers. The use of child soldiers is a huge issue in the Congo.”

But by the end of the evening we had a sincere plan in place; we'd run and bike in a triathlon race that was scheduled for the end of the summer to raise funds for Women for Women International, a non-profit organization that offers business training for women in the DRC, among other places.

I left Genny and Chloe that evening wanting to know more about the tension in the DRC and the people who were apart of the conflict there. But I had a hard time wholly picturing the individuals we were trying to help; they seemed hazy and far away. I had never met anyone from the DRC. I tried to picture what their home was like – hot and dry? I wasn't sure. It energized me, this action towards something that I had only read about so far — I like learning about new things. But the conflict still felt distant when I climbed into my car that night, waved goodbye to the dog.

As I drove home and wound my way down Genny's country road, I daydreamed about bike routes and running paths. I needed a challenge; something to shake me awake, to jar me outside of myself and allow me to engage with this bigger issue that felt so complex and far away. I thought about hills. Hills would be good.

* * *

We did train on hills that summer. I picked some really terrible ones. Long and steep — the ones you curse internally as you bike up them but when you reach their crests you feel wholly heroic. My calves got bigger.

And maybe my mind widened a little bit, too; I read more about the people I was racing for.

Women for Women International publishes articles and facts about the women that they assist on their website. Throughout June and July I read about how the organization's training program can wildly revolutionize a woman's life: students in the two-year business program in the DRC increase their daily income over two-hundred percent after graduating. They develop family planning strategies. They form support networks with each other and are able enforce their rights and develop their voices.

And the students I read about that summer were women who, really, were enrolling in the Women for Women International workshops with nothing. In fact many of them began with less than nothing — they'd had things taken away from them; they had been raped by rebels, their husbands had been murdered, their children had been taken away, they had lost family members, homes, and shops due to militia violence.

And so I biked and ran and became stronger, and I also began to gain a clearer picture in my head of these people across the globe, 7,000 miles away from Maine, who were struggling and who were real.

Chloe, Genny and I received a lot of support that summer. We held an educational event about the conflict in the DRC on a July evening in Chloe's backyard, and our friends, our parents, and our parents' friends came. It felt right, it really did, to be doing something. It felt powerful to be applying what we were learning about this conflict instead of just storing it in our heads.

At the end of the summer, all the running and biking and organizing culminated in a single check which Chloe and I placed in the mailbox together one afternoon. It sailed off towards — at least what seemed like — a world that I'd only just begun to visualize. I hoped it reached women like the ones I'd read about.

And then we went out for ice cream.

* * *

That summer of 2012 ran through my fingers in the way that summers always do, but faster. I woke up one day and it was already the end of August. My parents took me back up 295 through those dark trees until the “The Black Bear Inn” sign loomed through them and we turned off the highway. My dad saw the sign and chuckled and said

something like: “Oh! We’re back in black bear nation now, Kate!” I could only make this small, strangled noise in my throat.

But that fall I was a little less wobbly. I knew which buildings my classes were in, I knew the other girls on my team — I lived with one. I even took out library books. But I walked around still like I was in that morning limbo – anxious, muddled. I wasted a lot of thoughts and energy on external Kate. I didn’t yet have my own medic pack. I just got in my own way, tied my own tongue up. I relied on good grades and praise to feel good about myself — a feeling that faded quickly away so that I would be stuck searching for the next A or the next compliment.

In that first semester of 2012, I took an Animal Science class to explore my interest in veterinary science. I took an English class to honor my love of reading and writing, and in that same strain I took Honors 212, which is the fall Honors course for sophomores.

Mimi Killinger taught my 212 class. She was discerning. She got so excited about the texts that I could almost see her energy spread through the classroom like a fine fog and pass, subtly, into all of our heads.

In late September we read *Sidereus Nuncius* for Mimi’s class. It’s a short account by Galileo Galilei about his astronomical discoveries and inventions in the early 1600s.

I stayed up late reading *Sidereus Nuncius* and couldn’t help but comment on it in class. I liked how intimate it was; Galileo shares his raw puzzling in its pages. He writes about using his advanced telescope to gain a better view of the solar system, and he includes his continuous questioning: “Jupiter presented himself... three little stars were positioned near him, small but very bright. Although I believed them to be a number of

fixed stars, they nevertheless intrigued me ...” I felt like personal musings like these pulled me back in an immediate way to the experiences Galileo was having. His work in 1610 felt more *believable* — he was brilliant and clever (I’d known that already), but he was also real and human; he questioned and pondered things and second-guessed himself in that way that I did, too.

In class, Mimi added a deeper layer to the way I thought about *Sidereus Nuncius*. She prompted us to step back and think about how Galileo’s work — and the presentation of that work — tied to the larger ideas of the scientific method and what it means to be human. We talked about how Galileo’s work reflected a kind of integrity; Galileo encompassed the details and the mistakes of his thinking process, and outlined his ideas even when they chafed against the ideas of his society. He presented a heliocentric model of the solar system when the Catholic Church was touting Ptolemy’s geocentric one. And so we asked, as a class; *what role has this kind of divulgence played in the history of scientific discovery? Is it something that’s honored today, and if so, how?*

As we worked with later texts, Mimi kept our fingers on the pulse of these larger ideas: in discussing *Frankenstein*, we grappled with the role of the scientific method in Victor’s creation. In reading Francis Bacon’s *The Great Instauration* and *New Atlantis*, she drew our attention to the way that Bacon seemed to connect the idea of honesty to science in the way that Galileo did — he warned his scientist peers to give up their practice of “carrying a show of perfection in the whole ...” and instead, urged them to “seek their knowledge at the fountain,” to collect and record *all* of their data and mistakes.

Throughout that semester, there were always a few stragglers left in the classroom after everyone had filed out, to talk with Mimi about an idea. She was a good listener. She asked my friend and fellow-runner, Carolyn, and I, about our cross-country races every week, without fail: “How is the running this week? How was your race in Massachusetts last weekend?”

And when I would leave Mimi’s class period on Tuesday mornings and then sit in my massive Anthropology lecture — find a seat in a sea of students — and listen to a professor whose name I could never remember, I felt a little more known, a little more anchored, because she’d listened.

* * *

The summer after my sophomore year, in July of 2013, Mimi emailed me about an essay contest called “The Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics Essay Competition,” a national writing contest that asks undergraduate students to grapple with an ethical issue they’ve encountered and to write about how that experience affected them in a 12 to 15-page paper. She wondered if this might be something I’d be interested in pursuing. She knew that I liked to write; we had talked about my writing after class one day that past fall.

I read her email and gave a little yelp of surprise; she’d thought of me? She’d thought of my writing? Moreover, here she was offering me a chance to do more of it, about a topic that seemed powerful to me.

I thought about what I’d most like to write about — the DRC, maybe? Those faraway people?

* * *

On a Tuesday afternoon in early September, 2013, once I was back at UMaine as a junior, Mimi and I met in her office to talk about the ethics contest.

Mimi's office was in Holmes Hall, an ancient brick building at the edge of campus that used to house a couple of science laboratories in the early 1900's. Beneath her office window there were this large stone engraving on the side of the building that said "Experiment Station."

That Tuesday, as I walked towards Holmes Hall, I saw Mimi typing away at her desk through her window, and I saw the old "Experiment Station" engraving right beneath her and I was struck by how fitting the whole scene was —these old letters that matched Mimi's energy and the way she liked to question things. Here was the literary explorer at work in her experiment station.

My hands grew gloves of cold sweat as I stepped inside the brick building and climbed the stairs to Mimi's office. I was jittery about connecting with her; I admired her, and I was grateful she'd reached out to me and wanted to listen to me. I wanted to *do well* right back.

When I knocked on her door, Mimi opened it and gave me this big smile and ushered me inside. "Kate! So nice to see you. How are you? How was your summer?"

I told her about it without really looking into her eyes. I stumbled over my words, and as my eyes flickered back and forth, Mimi just looked right back at me in this steady way and nodded along and smiled.

Then she asked, "So, tell me what you'd want to write about for this essay!"

I told her about my summer project with Chloe and Genny. I told her how I felt it had woken me up a little bit to the issues in the DRC, had helped me to gain a clearer picture of that distant place.

Mimi was intrigued. She recommended that I write down notes about my summer experience and bring them to our second meeting the next week. And she also suggested that I read *Night* by Elie Wiesel, so that I might better understand the nature of the contest, and so I would know the personal story of the man who had started it.

When I left her office that day, I headed for the library and took out *Night*. I swallowed it up the rest of that week. In *Night*, Wiesel writes about his childhood in a concentration camp and the experience he had as a teenager in the war. Both of his parents and his younger sister were killed by Nazis.

Mimi decided to read *Night*, too, that week, amidst her busy schedule — and though she'd already read it — and we reconvened that second Tuesday with dog-eared copies. We flipped to the sections we'd been most struck by.

"I am so drawn to the running scene," I told her, as we sat across from each other in the experiment station. "When Elie is a teenager and the Germans force them to change camps and all of the prisoners are running through the snow ... it made me tear up. I can't believe the things that he went through."

Mimi shook her head back and forth and closed her eyes and pressed her copy of *Night* up against her chest. "Kate," she said, "I am so glad I read this again when you did. What an incredible story. It reminds me why writing about these things is so important."

And then she said, "I have been thinking about your own project, and I think it might be helpful for you to talk with someone who's actually experienced the conflict

you want to write about. I have this wonderful student, Daniella Runyambo, who actually grew in the Congo. She's a student here now. Maybe the two of you could just meet and talk about her time there?"

I wrote an email to Daniella later that day:

"Hi, Daniella, my name is Kate Spies and I am a student in the Honors College. I'm currently writing an essay about a charity event that I did for women in the Democratic Republic of Congo with the help of Mimi Killinger. Mimi suggested I reach out to you in order to talk to someone who's actually lived in the Congo. Do you think you might be able to meet for coffee sometime this week?"

I clicked the SEND button. Our orbits made their first movements towards alignment.

* * *

A few days later, I sat in the corner of the library café. I felt like I had eaten lava again. My stomach juices were frothing from anxiety. And I could feel my heart pumping manically away, shooting blood around my body like it was a squirt gun — one of the turbo-loaded, super-sized versions that you lust for as a kid.

In high school, when I was going to meet a new person or when I was joining a new club or sports team my mom would say: "Speak up, Kate" before I left. She knew how timid I could be in new situations, and I think it frustrated her a little, when she watched the way my shoulders slouched and how people would have to lean in to hear me when I introduced myself. And so when she knew I was nervous about some upcoming thing — right before I went out the door — she would look me right in the eye and she would square up in front of me with her arms crossed, and raise her eyebrows: "Don't forget to speak up, Kate." She would do this *every time*. And it would make me a little *mad*. I always wanted to holler back (but never did): "I'm fine! I don't need to speak

up!” But I think that was all part of her plan, because I’d huff away and — inevitably — end up talking louder to the next person I came across, the glint of her determined eyes flashing in my brain and her “Speak up!” echoing in there, too.

That Friday in the library, I had no shame. I grasped at ways to get a hold of myself. I was a junior in college but I wished I had my mom with me; I tried to picture those high school scenes with her all over again. I imagined her small frame in front of mine, tried to muster this inner admonishing voice that matched hers: “Speak up, Kate! This is important!”

Because that day in the library café I was waiting to meet Daniella, and the idea of her sitting down across from me both thrilled and scared me.

For my summer charity project with Chloe and Genny, the closest I’d come to the DRC conflict was the online facts and accounts published on the Women for Women International website. But here, here at this wooden table in the corner of the café I’d have the chance to talk with a real person, someone who’d been shaped by that tension. Daniella seemed to embody so much of what I wanted to know about the DRC; what it was like to truly be affected by the conflict, what it was like to grow up there, what it was like to be a young woman there.

Before this, I’d never truly met anyone who’d lived in a context marked by conflict. I’d seen international students around campus. I’d had a few in my classes. But I’d never really *talked* with someone who’d had an entirely different background from my own. My head thrummed with questions: *Would it be emotional for Daniella to talk with me about the DRC? Had she lost family members in the conflict?* I worried that I

wouldn't ask the right things, would be clumsy and bring up something that was painful for her, that I wouldn't show the respect and investment that I felt internally.

Moreover, as with all social interactions, I knew this situation was out of my control. I couldn't guarantee success, couldn't guarantee that Daniella would like me — which felt very important at the time, even though I didn't even know her yet, because I was in that limbo and anxious state; I was still sick with that the disease I'd come down with in high school, fixated on gaining approval.

The funny thing is, today, I know how goofy and open and warm Daniella is. And I think she would have laughed — her luminous laugh — if she had been able to look inside my head on the first day that we met. It would have made her bend over and hold her stomach and cover her mouth if she'd been able to see how nervous she'd made me.

That first day, I looked up and finally saw her — the only dark-skinned person in the café — and it sent my heart thumping faster. I gave an awkward little wave from my corner table. She smiled and strolled towards me. She was tall and slender, with rows of beautiful, ombré hair that was lighter at the bottom and darker, reddish black and brown near their tops. She wore a pair of slim jeans and a university t-shirt that glowed bright blue against her dark arms.

I stood up and said “Hi, I'm Kate!” I heard my voice crack a little bit.

“Hi, Kate,” Daniella smiled back at me. “Sorry I am a little late.”

“Oh my gosh! No that's okay. That's totally fine!” I sputtered.

We both sat down at the small, wooden table and Daniella slid her backpack off of her shoulders and pushed it against her chair. She was still smiling. We lobbed introductory information back and forth. I struggled through it:

“Thanks so much for meeting me here and being willing to talk with me,” I started.

“Oh, no problem! I am happy to help,” she said.

“Did you just come from class?” I asked.

“Yes, we just got out.”

“Oh, okay, well thanks again for coming here.” I was already going in circles.

“No problem! I have time.”

“Well, are you having a good semester?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s busy, but it’s good! What about you?” Daniella smiled and asked back.

“Oh, yes, mine is good. I am taking introductory chemistry so that’s not so fun, but otherwise it’s good,” I replied.

“Oh,” Daniella said, “I didn’t like that class — yeah that is no fun.” She laughed. I followed her lead and laughed back.

A pause.

“It’s windy today!” I said, grasping.

“Yeah! This fall weather can get so dreary.”

We fell silent as we both looked out the window at the late-September day. I felt the gray tide of panic slosh up through my chest; *I’d lost the conversation, already?*

Silence, already?!

I'd come prepared with structured questions about Daniella's experience growing up in the DRC and about the conflict her community had faced. I'd typed the questions on my computer so I could read them off as I interviewed her, and so I could transcribe her answers as she spoke.

Daniella turned back to me, away from the window, and I was suddenly fiercely relieved that I'd given myself some sort of script. All my nerves were already making me forget how to carry on a conversation. I muttered something about "Getting us started" and pulled my computer out and started reading off the screen:

"Okay, Daniella, so I am wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your background? How long did you live in the Congo?" I'd written the whole question out exactly like that, with the "Okay" and everything, because I'd been afraid of being nervous and clumsy and stilted.

Daniella paused, a brief moment where she put her hand under chin, and then she started, "Okay. So my mom is from Rwanda and my Dad is from the Congo. We lived in the Congo when I was younger, and then we had to leave there when I was 13 because it became too violent," she said. "We lived in Rwanda after that for three years before we came to Portland in Maine."

"Okay, thank you," I said, and then I read the next lines on screen: "How has the conflict and the tribal tension in the DRC affected the community there?"

"Honestly, I who was born there and I don't understand it still," Daniella said. "The people in the Congo are just focused on surviving – they can't think beyond that. The Congolese themselves are very lost, the country doesn't have humanity – it's really hard to relate, to try to understand what they're going through."

“Each rebel group is understanding things in the really wrong way,” she continued. “In Congo there’s no unity among themselves. It’s really hard to make one point across, to make one problem be heard. For a person here to understand the specific problems for each region would be impossible. So many people have failed to help the Congo. You don’t know how to start. Even myself, living here, I ask myself, how do I help my country? The one thing I can offer is, if the country is actually stable, to go back and help in a public health kind of way. I want to get my education and try to go to medical school, so maybe I can go back and make a difference. But it’s so hard to help right now.”

I nodded as she finished, “Oh my gosh, that would be amazing to go back and help,” I said. And then I read off my next question: “I’m wondering if you could talk about your family traditions, cultural traditions that you engaged with in the DRC — and then how those have changed or stayed the same for your family since you’ve been in the states?”

Daniella paused again before she started. And then: “I know my family values,” she said, “The problem with knowing my culture is that my dad never grew up in his tribe, he went to school. And then he married a Rwandese woman. But over everything, all the values I grew up with were pretty much the same. Our family is Christian – we value our faith the most, through everything else. We value of our family, what you do for your parents. That’s how we grew up.”

“Most of my people never went to school,” she added. “My father was the first doctor in my tribe. My dad’s generation was the first to actually get an education, and not all of them did. After that, my family started to understand what education meant. In my

family in particular, education is a big thing. We are living in a new world, where sometimes old traditions don't work anymore. We have our own tradition in our house – our own values, things that are important to us to follow and to define what our life is.”

We talked for an hour or so in this pattern. I asked Daniella about the different schools she'd attended and what her personal education had been like. She gave me long answers, lots of details.

When we reached the last of my questions, I said, “Okay, I think that's all I had to ask you for now. Do you think if I have any more questions for my essay I could email you or we could meet again?”

“Okay,” Daniella nodded her head, and then said, “But I feel like I am not the best person to ask about this. I could connect you with my mom? She actually works with people in Portland that have come over from Congo. She might be more help.”

“Oh! Okay,” I said. “Yeah that would be great!” But I took it entirely personally; *she didn't like me?! She doesn't want to talk again?* Though in that instant I didn't blame her for not wanting to sit across from this anxious version of myself, this quiet girl who could barely look her in the eye and had to read off a screen to keep from getting tongue-tied.

* * *

A week later, on the first Friday of the November of my junior year, I was perched in a wooden chair at the same table in the library café.

I'd emailed Daniella after our first meeting because I had more questions about the conflict in the DRC for my essay. I hadn't brought up her mom — just sent a short note asking if she was free and crossed my fingers.

I was hoping to explore how women's voices had been affected by the conflict in the DRC for my Elie Wiesel essay. I wanted to write about my summer charity project, but my first meeting with Daniella had started to shake me awake to the more immediate and tangible story she might be able to share. I wanted to ask Daniella her thoughts about the role women had in her Congolese community, and how the tribal tension might have affected them. She'd responded the next day with a "yes."

But I was nervous all over again that morning. I still wasn't sure what she thought of external Kate. And I was worried about being just as awkward and uncomfortable this time around. I wanted to *do well*, wanted to gain some sign of her approval. So I got in my own way, felt my heart thrum faster and faster just as it had the week before.

At the café table, waiting for her, I sat with my legs bent and my knees up near my face. The chair was small; I'd had to do a lot of clever twisting in order to make the soles of my shoes fit on the seat. I wrapped my arms around my folded legs and hugged them to my chest. This is my go-to position when I am nervous: full-on fetal. And that morning I felt like there was something small in my stomach that was trying to stand up but kept falling down. I wanted to whisper: "calm down in there."

I pressed my lips together and bit the fleshy, center part of the bottom one. I set my chin on my knee and tapped my pencil on the dark wood of the café tabletop. I put the pencil down. I hooked loose strands of hair behind my ears. I looked out the window. I looked at the doorway of the café. I looked out the window again. *What would she think of me, this time around? Would I do well?*

I scabbled around for some confidence and I thought about the dinner I'd had with my roommates the evening before:

That junior year I lived with two girls and two guys in a small apartment and we'd declared the previous evening "Family Dinner Night." One roommate, Evan, had cooked a massive pot of spaghetti in our small kitchen. He'd played Italian opera from his laptop as he stirred the boiling vat. And as our little home filled up with steam and "La Bohème", my roommate, Emily, and I had laid out thriftstore china plates on our dining room table. We'd filled them with slices of white toast that we'd covered in garlic powder and butter (frugal garlic bread). We'd placed a bottle of cheap wine in the center of the table that had reflected the kitchen light and thrown off yellow shimmers onto the walls. We'd folded paper napkins into delicate triangles and placed them in front of each seat.

And then Evan had yelled out, "It's ready!" and he'd come barreling into the dining room with the heavy pot against his chest, and ladled out these steaming noodle mountains onto our plates. And then the five of us had sat down at the table and everyone was grinning —these big, goofy grins — and we'd all started laughing when we caught the triumphant look on each other's faces. It was an impressive spread we'd made, albeit a thrifty one. Because I was happy and felt known and liked I'd told jokes throughout dinner and jabbered at length with my roommate, Courtney, about our mutual love for Van Morrison.

After, I'd washed dishes with Evan and we'd talked about *The Tempest*. He is a literary buff. "You know that one section?" I'd asked him, "The poem that Ariel sings? 'Those are pearls that were his eyes' ... I love that part. It's so beautiful. I always think about it."

“Oh yeah!” Evan had said. “I like that part, too. It’s so poetic. Though it’s a little creepy, describing a body at the bottom of the sea ...”

A little bit later, as our sponges turned red with tomato sauce, our arms deep in suds, he’d told me his favorite character was Caliban, too.

I ran through this memory as I sat in the library that morning in my upright fetal position. I tried to remind myself how there were people who seemed to like me, like Evan and Courtney and Emily and Ian. And I tried to remember how the comfortable version of myself could be silly and talkative. I thought desperately: *I can connect! I have proof! My roommates and I are having spaghetti leftovers for lunch!*

And then I looked up and my eyes landed on Daniella as she glided through the doorway of the café. The two halves of my brain were two hands holding onto the dinner memory — my proof, my little plate of armor — and I closed my eyes and for a second tried to keep it there, pressed in and part of me. But when I opened them I felt the image dissolve and disperse, like cotton candy in a mouth.

I unwound myself and dropped my shoes to the floor and tried to look a little more dignified in my chair as Daniella strode over to the table. She smiled at me. She said “Hi” in two syllables, like “Hi-eye” and gave me a little wave of her hand.

I said “Hi, Daniella!” in a voice so high-pitched and squeaky I sounded like an animated mouse. And suddenly I didn’t know where to put my eyes — I get this problem sometimes, when I am nervous and feeling unknown and insecure.

I looked at Daniella’s face and met her gaze but only for a second and then — relief — as she looked away towards her chair and sat down across from me at the table. She settled herself and leaned her bag against the chair legs.

Daniella looked back up after adjusting her bag. And in that instant I lost the picture of the Kate of the evening before. I forgot how to be comfortable with myself. My worries flashed from one to another in my head, in the same way that single fish flash in a school of minnows:

What does she think?

Did she enjoy our first meeting?

Does she think it's weird that I am not looking at her?

Am I making her uncomfortable?

What should I say first?

I'd prepared my questions for her the weekend before. I had them typed and numbered in **Arial Black** on my laptop screen on the table in front of me.

Daniella looked across the table at me, expectant. And all of the squirming and lip-biting and limb-rearranging had really been because of this, building me up to when I would be facing this. This moment. This person. I could not know what she thought. I could not control these things. I could not be sure that I would make a good impression. I felt for a second that I was far out in the middle of some sea, in a trough between two high waves; anything could happen. I could sink or swim.

Did I detect a hint of coldness in her greeting? Daniella continued to look at me and I swallowed and said, "How are your classes going?"

"Oh they are going well, just busy. How are yours?"

"Okay," I said. "I am taking chemistry like I said last time. I'm also taking physics, and I'm finding it pretty hard!"

“Oh! I took that class!” Daniella opened her eyes wide and leaned forward a little across the table. “I thought it was hard, too! Professor Dudish is such a hard-grader.”

“I know! And his homework always takes me so long to finish ...”

We commiserated. I started to feel myself unwind inside, like my heart had been clutching my lungs in a fetal position, too.

I liked listening to Daniella. She told me about her most difficult class of the semester and what it had been like so far. For those moments, I could just nod and focus on her words. She used her hands when she talked, saying “you know?!” and “like.” And I was the best at shaking my head up and down and saying “Ohhh” and “Oh my gosh! That sounds so hard!” And I meant it! I always do when I say something like this, even though my friends make fun of me for prefacing so many of my sentences with “Oh my gosh!” and for how high my voice gets sometimes and the way that I raise my eyebrows. But I do mean it, all of it. And listening like this let me contribute without stumbling over my own stuff.

On that second Friday with Daniella I wanted to know more about her *feelings* on what she had experienced. I also wanted to learn about how someone with such a different background — me — could begin to more deeply understand the conflict that had forced her to leave her home. Because I felt very different from her. Not in a good way or a bad way. Just very different. She’d grown up across the ocean from me; I’d lived in rural Maine my whole life. She had this dark skin and braided hair; I was pale and blonde. When she spoke, I heard a hint of the other languages that she’d known before English. Her experiences and her history seemed to diverge so greatly from mine.

The weekend before that Friday, when I had sat on my apartment couch and typed out questions to ask her, I'd felt brave and interested and wanted to acknowledge this difference. I wanted to grapple with it and drag it out into the open.

So amidst my nerves that morning, I tried to get out of my own way. I looked down at the screen in front of me and read off my first scripted question: "As a Congolese woman, Daniella, do you think the women of your country need a voice? Why is it important for these people to be heard – and what is important that we hear?"

Daniella had leaned in to hear me and then she pulled back, head held up. She paused. It was a long pause. So long that it caught my attention. Half a minute. I looked up from the screen and met her eyes. I felt myself — entirely, peacefully — held in this moment.

She started out slowly: "Hmmm. I definitely think they need a voice, because they carry so much, and there's a limit to how much a person can carry." I nodded. I looked into her eyes, then looked down at my screen and my note-taking got quick and flurried — quick finger pad punches on the keys — as she continued:

"When I first came here the one thing I admired, the one thing that I gained that made me understand, was I knew that I was going to be heard. I've never been heard in my entire life," Daniella said. "I've gone through hard times, I can't do anything about that. I might not have the money, I might not have everything here, but I know that I'm going to be heard, if I have a concern, something I need to say, I can be heard. I can speak up, and that gives you a peace."

I typed frantically as she spoke, tried to catch it all. I thought suddenly about the way that my mom would tell me to "Speak up" in high school. I couldn't imagine ever

feeling the way that Daniella had felt, like I couldn't be heard; I had walked around, always, with options. My silence was self-imposed. If no one heard me it was only because I bit my lips instead of opening them, or sat on my hands in class. And I was shot through by a fierce wave of guilt as I listened to Daniella. I had been giving up my right to speak because I was fixated on what other people thought of me and on *doing well* and it made foolishly cautious. And in this light, across from this woman who had desperately wanted to be listened to, my actions felt cowardly. Selfish. I nodded in earnest as she spoke. I said softly, "Wow" and then, "Oh my gosh, that makes sense." I was impossible to express how much I meant it that morning.

Daniella nodded back at me when I said that. And she continued: "Those women, they've carried so much, they've been through so much, one thing that they need is to be heard. They deserve to be heard – there's so much to say, I always tell people: people being aware of something speaks so much, when people are not aware, it is so sad. Just someone out there who is caring and knowing their story is so important; maybe they can't understand that pain, but it's so important for them to be there and to listen."

Is she talking about this meeting? About us? About me sitting across the table from her? My thoughts flashed again but they held more hope than self-consciousness. I smiled at her.

Daniella continued to talk about the women in her country and their lack of recognition and respect. She said, "It's more like being a slave in your own country, and living under someone else's life, and doing what they want to do. You lack the freedom of living your own life. They need a voice to actually live and feel like they are citizens in their own country."

I started to read my next question off of my screen but I didn't really need it. I looked up halfway through and kept my eyes level with hers: "So," I said, "I know when we last talked, you talked about finding identity when you were younger in the Congo and how that was difficult, because your family was considered the minority — and to me, voice is a building block of identity." I lifted my palm out in the air and then placed it against my cheek. "So, would you mind just talking about that a little bit more and how growing up in the Congo and being a part of this conflict shaped your voice? I don't want to put words in your mouth ... but do you think your process of finding your voice, and forming your identity, was, like, affected by that?"

Daniella told me she thought it was. She talked about Portland:

"It was really frustrating not speaking English at first," she said. "All of the asylees like me were put into the ESL program. We didn't understand the system, and almost nobody had faith that we would do any better. I remember being put in classes and trying to explain to my counselor that I already knew the material and that I wanted to take other classes. All we wanted was somebody to hear us out and listen to us. It was exhausting to fight every day. It is very degrading when nobody is willing to hear what you have to say."

When I reached the end of my questions, I asked Daniella if there was any subject that we didn't talk about that she felt was important for me to mention as I wrote about the DRC.

"No, I don't think so, we talked about a lot I think." She paused, and then she leaned forward and said, "Thank you. You are reminding me of a lot of things I needed to

be reminded of.” She smiled with both rows of teeth. “You are reminding me of where I have come from and what I have been through.”

I whispered a little *whoa* in my head. My heart strummed in my chest but it was not in a manic way — it buzzed in a good and hopeful way. I looked down, blushed and sputtered but recovered enough to thank her back: “It has been just as important to me to hear your story.”

Later, I traipsed past the university parking lots and up the hill that led to my apartment. I was hungry for spaghetti. But I also had this lightness in my chest. I was feeling like: *Okay. Yes, okay. This means something. Maybe I mean something. Maybe this is making some kind of difference.* I felt like the Kate who wrote the questions for Daniella in the first place and who read articles about the DRC’s conflict because she *wanted* to, because she felt wholly that she ought to learn more and that she ought to try to understand other people battling such foreign-feeling fights, and the Kate who looked her roommates in the eyes the night before and had laughed with them and chattered about Van Morrison and *The Tempest* — I felt like that Kate and the Kate who sat across from Daniella that day were coming closer together.

I decided to email Daniella again a few days later. I wanted to learn more about *her* for my project — this real and tangible and discerning person. When I talked with her the DRC didn’t feel as far away. I wanted to have more time to listen.

* * *

Weeks later, in the first week of December of that junior year, I waited for Daniella at our usual spot in the library café: a wooden table at the back of that broad room. We’d sat there for a few hours every Friday of November. She’d said “yes” to my

second email — and to every one after that. And we had been changing. I had stopped sputtering

I bought us cups of tea from the café counter and placed them on the top of our table. They let off curls of steam as I waited and looked out the window.

“Hi!” Daniella spotted me from the café doorway and waved, the flash of her light palm. She wove through the tables to reach ours. Her backpack and long, braided hair were both slung over her shoulder and to the side.

We caught up. She brought the tea to her lips. Then: “BLECK.”

Daniella pressed long fingers — dark skin over bones that are slender in the way that flutes are slender — against her lips, as if the tea inside her mouth might spill out. Her eyes scrunched up, and her forehead creased, and it was like her whole body was working to keep the stuff inside. I almost shielded my face. She swallowed, then blurted out — and it was nearly a gasp — “No sugar!”

With her other hand she snared the full cup of tea I’d bought and whisked it across the room, back to the creamer and sugar station. She slid the cup under the sugar dispenser, and knocked into the button six times in a row with her fist. The sugar came out in a dusty cloud.

She tripped back to our table, cup held high, sugar piled above the rim like a small, frosty, and dissolving mountain. She slid into her seat. She leaned forward and swooped down to take a big sip off the top.

“Ahh. That’s better. I used to use 12 shots of sugar! But now I have forced myself down to six,” she said. She looked up at me and smacked her lips. I laughed. She smiled back, “Aren’t you proud?”

I had been collecting and learning many small details that month. I knew that Daniella knew the sugar dispenser, hit it fast and hard, because she spent most of her time in the library. Black chai tea was a staple to late nights spent studying in her favorite corner by the library printers. That fall, she was in the midst of tackling a capstone project in Histology, and she was at the library more often than her local Orono apartment. Plus, the library loaned out laptops, and Daniella couldn't afford her own. She came for word processing, access to her emails and school account, space for the quiet concentration that her studies demanded, copious sugar.

That Friday, the café bustled. Other frequenters circled in and out. Daniella crossed her legs and settled in amidst the swirling of a school morning. Sipping, smiling.

She leaned over the table towards me, tapped the screensaver of her cellphone. “This is a picture of my mom!”

I saw a wide and white smile, dark hair swept back over a high forehead, big eyes. I looked up and was faced with all of that, the same eyes.

Daniella showed me other pictures. I'd asked about her siblings. She pulled photos up on the library laptop she was borrowing and scrolled through each one, sighing and pressing the pads of her fingers against the screen as she told me about each different brother and sister.

There was this one shot: Daniella's mother had her arm wrapped around the shoulders of her slender, younger sister, Lydia. This was the sister that had been too young to speak or worry when rebels had almost attacked the Runyambos in Bukavu. In the photo, Lydia and Daniella's mom had their heads tilted toward the camera. They had the same, golden-retriever grins, like there was a delicious secret between them.

Daniella slid the laptop away. “They are the craziest people I know. But they are the best people.” She wouldn’t see them until May of that year; one of Daniella’s brother attends the University of Maine, but her other siblings are scattered; one at Bates College, another graduated. Her youngest siblings attend school in North Carolina where her parents had moved because the Portland winters had grown too harsh for her mother.

“But it’s okay!” she reassured me that Friday, after telling me all this. “I have work to do here.”

* * *

In the fall of 2014, a year after our November conversations in the library, Daniella and I began meeting with Mimi on Friday afternoons.

Before that school year started Daniella and I had invited a member of her tribe, Georges Budagu, to speak on campus. We’d wanted to reach out to the larger UMaine community about the conflict in the DRC. It was Daniella’s idea to invite Budagu. He lives in Portland and knew her family. Budagu moved to Maine after fleeing the DRC as the Runyambos did — and he self-published a book about leaving his country and finding a new footing in Maine. It’s called *Ladder to the Moon*. He’d agreed to talk about his experience and bring copies of his memoir to campus in late October. We decided to call the event: “LISTEN: A Reading and Story-Sharing Event with Georges Budagu.”

One Friday afternoon in September I wound my way along the edge of campus towards Mimi’s office. I was running late for our meeting and I trotted along with my head down and my backpack clutched tight, in an effort at becoming more aerodynamic and less tardy.

“Kate!” I heard a shout from behind me. Daniella was speed walking along my path. “I’m running so late!” she called. “I just got out of a class — my teacher kept us late!”

I slowed my pace until we walked in stride. “Oh my gosh, me too!” I said. “I think Mimi will understand.”

We bustled along until we were outside Mimi’s office door. We both knocked, our two fists rap-tapping on the door.

Mimi pulled it open with a big “Hello!” and ushered us in and waved away our apologies for being late. We settled into the black chairs she kept in front of her desk.

“So, I have been thinking about who we might like to ask to help us sponsor this event,” Mimi said. “I think the Honors College would certainly be interested in helping. What have you two been thinking?”

“Well, I was thinking maybe the Women’s Studies department might be a good department to ask,” I said. “I’ve been emailing back and forth with the director, Mazie Hough, like I was telling you guys last time; it seems like her department would want to be involved.”

“That sounds like a great idea, Kate. Maybe you can just email Mazie next week to ask,” Mimi said.

“Yes, definitely! I can do that,” I said.

“I have been wondering if it would be okay for me to ask the African Students Association to be a sponsor for this,” Daniella said. “There are a lot of students in that club who had to leave their countries too. I think they would want to help us pay for something like this.”

And then she added, “Also I just really want them to be there for Georges’ event. Everyone is always lumping us together with the international kids. But most of us don’t have homes to go back to. We had things happen to us like Georges. We are not just going to school here. This is our new home. Maybe the African students could talk about their stories, too. I just don’t think that people should lump us all together.”

“I think that makes a lot of sense,” Mimi said.

I nodded. I thought about the way Daniella had felt about being generalized in Portland.

“Wow, I didn’t know people did that,” I said. “Asylees are definitely having such different experiences from the international students. You should definitely talk about that at the event.”

By the end of that meeting we had a list of sponsors to contact to help in paying for Budagu’s gas fare and the refreshments we planned to serve at his presentation.

“This is getting exciting, you guys! It’s feeling real!” Mimi said as we stood up from our chairs to leave.

“I knowwww,” Daniella said, drawing out the “oh” sound for a couple of seconds. “I am so excited he is actually coming!” And she beamed this high-wattage beam and the skin around her eyes crinkled up. And she turned and looked at both of us, “Thank you! This means so much, you guys. *You* guys have done this. *You* are making this happen. It means so much. Thank you.” A short pause and then: “Okay, *now* I will go.” And she let out a deep laugh.

* * *

One evening in early October, 2014, Daniella and I worked together in the library café to finish up some final tasks for LISTEN event. We sat at one of our usual tables — near the back — with a pile of thank-you cards for our event sponsors and some notes about our event budget.

I sign my last name, “Spies,” with a little star over my “i.” It takes the place of the dot. I’ve signed my name this way since middle school, and it’s become something I do that’s terribly entrenched.

So I starred all of my “i’s” mindlessly on the thank-you notes as Daniella read over the LISTEN event budget.

Suddenly, she made a wild snatch across the table towards me. Her slender fingers flashed out and grabbed the note I’d just signed.

She said, “Kate!” And then she put her nose up to the card and squinted her eyes and inspected it. Then she let out this great holler, “Kayyy–*eet!*”

“What is this?!” she demanded, and pointed to the card with her long pointer finger, and looked at me with this big open-mouthed smile.

I thought, *Oh no, what is it?*

And then she let out this whoop of laughter: “Kate! Oh my gosh, is this how you sign things?”

“Ummm ... yeah?” I said.

And she laughed even harder and looked at all the other cards that I’d signed so far and put her nose right up to my signature and then grinned even bigger. She chortled, “What, are you like twelve years old?”

And I got feisty—for once—and parried back: “I like my star! It’s sweet! It’s how I always sign things!”

She responded only with more laughter. We’d both had exams that week. We’d reached the ratio of caffeine and sleep-deprivation that leads to delirium. I said, “You’re just jealous! My star is so special. Don’t judge me, Daniella! You just wish your signature could look like that.”

She snatched my pen away and muttered darkly, in mock vehemence, “Fine. Let me show you *my* perfect signature. It is so professional.” And she scrawled out her signature in the black ink next to mine. She did it so fast and sloppily that it was just a mess of loops. We looked down at the swirls of ink for a split second, then up at each other — burst out laughing when our eyes met.

“We are a mess!” she said.

“Yes,” I agreed. “An absolute mess.”

Though in that moment I was feeling whole and complete and connected, and not like a mess at all. I felt like I had set my self-consciousness down somewhere and had lost track of it entirely, like Daniella had hid it from me or something.

* * *

On October 30th, the day Budagu was scheduled to speak, Mimi and I set up chairs, a podium, and a microphone in the large room in Estabrooke Hall we were using for the event. We spread out the cheese cubes and vegetable platters we’d bought on corner tables. Daniella was still in her last class of the day.

The room was quiet. Just chairs and finger foods and Mimi and me. She patted my arm. “This is exciting, Kate! How are you feeling about everything?”

Daniella and I had both prepared speeches to share that night about our experiences. My speech was folded up in my pocket.

“I am feeling good!” I said, and I was telling the truth, “I think this will be a good night.”

Daniella walked into the Estabrooke room a few minutes later. She had her own speech in one of her hands and her cell phone clutched in the other. She called out to us, “Hi, you guys! Georges is running a little late I think! He’s still in Waterville.” And then her phone buzzed and she brought it swiftly to her ear and answered in rapid French: “Georges? Bonjour ...”

Mimi and I exchanged a glance. “Wait, how far away is Waterville from here?” I asked.

“It’s far,” Mimi said. “But that’s okay. If it comes down to it, we’ll just ask everyone to enjoy the refreshments before Budagu’s presentation instead of after it,” she said.

Our audience started filtering into the room and filling the chairs: other Honors students, some professors, a few graduate students, and some members of the African Students Association.

I stood by Daniella in the corner of the room where she was talking on the phone with Budagu, giving him directions. I watched the audience getting bigger. I was not shaken; I felt a swell of pride for the event posters we’d made and the emails we’d sent advertising LISTEN. Daniella finally pulled her phone away from her ear after ten minutes or so and slid it into her pocket. “Okay, I think he’s speeding like crazy. He said he should be here soon. Are you nervous?” she asked.

“No, I am excited!” I said.

“Oh my gosh, I am so nervous, Kate. I am going to mess up. And my speech is so bad,” Daniella said and looked down at the crumpled piece of paper in her hand.

“Oh my gosh. No. This is going to be great, Daniella. We both have such important things to say,” I said in a firm voice — a voice that sounded like my mom’s when she’d told me to “Speak up!”

She looked at me with wide eyes and raised eyebrows and a taut mouth. I shook my head at her strained face and pulled her in for a hug. Because I knew the secret: people like *Daniella* were the secret. We weren’t giving our speeches that evening to gain the audience’s approval. This night wasn’t about *doing well*. There were people like Daniella staying up late in libraries or sitting in classes or walking around campuses or drinking sugary tea in the cafés all over the world. So many individuals with their own stories to share and their own lessons to teach. This night was about the fact that when you first saw these people they would be strangers. But there was too much to lose from not connecting with them, from being scared and self-critical in front of them. In fact there was too much to lose from living this way at all.

And so I leaned over and rubbed Daniella on the arm as she fidgeted with her speech and rolled the paper through her flute-fingers.

When the chairs were all full, and another ten minutes had passed, Budagu finally pulled up in his green car outside Estabrooke.

Daniella, Mimi, and I walked out to meet him. He was tall and dark and bald. He told us “Hello” and “I’m sorry I’m late” in a voice that lilted with an accent. We helped

him carry boxes of *Ladder to the Moon* inside. He set up his slideshow presentation as I took the speech from my pocket and read the words to myself internally.

When Budagu was settled, Daniella and I strode up to the podium. We'd agreed to stand next to each other during our speeches.

“I am very excited to be here tonight for our LISTEN event and to get to share with you a little bit about the things that I have learned over this past year,” I began, in a voice that sounded only a *little* bit like an animated mouse. “Being able to learn from Daniella recently has pushed me to think about my place as an individual; our conversations pushed me to wake up to my place as a global citizen, a member of a bigger community. Daniella shows me that there is deep power in recognizing this, and in using one’s voice to share this with others as she does. She inspires me to push myself to do this because I have been shown her strength, her empathy, and her powerful dreams for change — this, after she grappled with a transition I still am working to understand. Moreover, Daniella and I have talked about the significance of wanting to learn more, in being actively engaged, and in honoring one’s place as a member of a vibrant, varied community. This can be done, powerfully, through listening and sharing one another’s stories. We are inviting you to do that this evening with us. So thank you for joining us. And now I will turn it over to Daniella.”

The audience clapped as I stepped away from the podium and Daniella took my place and leaned towards the mike.

“Thank you, Kate. I want to talk to you all tonight about listening and the role of identity,” she started. Her voice was steady. “When I was growing up in Congo, violence forced me to leave my home. Things were unstable. I felt like I wasn’t able to fully form

my identity because of change and fear. But then, when I came to the Portland and went to Portland High School, I faced a new kind of challenge as I tried to develop my own voice; I became generalized along with the other students in the English-as-a-Second-Language program. Because we were new to this country and still learning English, people assumed that we weren't as smart or capable. I wasn't listened to. So when I came to college, I was grateful to try to and break away from this, to have the chance to be my own individual. But I found myself, even here, generalized as an 'international student.' I sometimes chose not to talk about my background because it was easier to pretend I still had a home to go back to. I met Kate at just the right time. She listened to me and asked me questions about my life; it reminded me of the place that I'd come from and the things I'd gotten through. It reminded me who I am," and she paused and smiled. "And now I will invite up Georges Budagu to the podium."

And then Daniella had looked up from her script and she'd gotten this big grin on her face and she leaned back towards the microphone and said in an loud voice: "I hope you all *listen* to him. You all better do some *listening* tonight, okay?"

The audience cracked up.

And as I stood next to her I was struck, knew suddenly in my gut: Daniella's easy jokes and her broad smiles ...this is what the soldier, Michelle, had gone back for those many years ago when she had needed saving in the DRC.

* * *

Daniella and I have been busy with our separate goals since the LISTEN event. Our orbits have been growing wider, stretching farther, as we prepare for life after

UMaine. But I don't think this means we have any less pull on one another, any less influence.

* * *

On Sunday, February 1st of this spring semester, I flew across the country to Pullman, Washington; I'd been invited to an interview at Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine.

Pullman is twenty minutes from the border of Idaho. It's located in an area called the "Palouse prairie": a large region of rolling, grassy hills that's bordered by the Snake River in the south and the forests of northern Idaho in the east.

That Sunday when I arrived in Pullman the Palouse hills loomed on either side of the main road. They were so large and smooth that they looked like they'd been frozen in undulation. They looked like the breasts of green giants.

* * *

The next day, the day of my interview, I woke up in my hotel room in buzzy static. The inevitable morning scrabbling began: *Where I am? What time is it?* But I'd been dreaming about the Palouse hills I'd seen the day before and when I cracked open my eyes that morning I remembered everything in an instant.

Out of bed, in the bathroom, I pulled on my lucky golden houndstooth blazer ("lucky" because I feel like whenever I wear it I draw strength from its fabulous sixties style). I fastened my hair into a half-do that framed my face. I pulled on a pair of crisp dress slacks that I'd ironed the night before. I swiped lipstick over my mouth and colored it a light pink. In front of the mirror I stood back and nodded and gave myself a swift, dorky thumbs-up. *Damn girl, ya look good.*

An hour later, I sat in the academic office of the College of Veterinary Medicine with other applicants waiting to be interviewed. I chatted with them until a tall, freckled man peered around the doorway.

He looked in at us and said, “Are any of you Kate Spies?”

“Oh! Yes, that’s me,” I said. I stood up and walked towards him and shook his hand when he held it out.

“Nice to meet you, Kate, I’m Dr. Steven Lampa. I teach in WSU’s Veterinary Neuroscience Department.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I said. “Thank you for having me today.”

I followed Dr. Lampa out of the office and down a blue-carpeted hallway. Along the walls were pictures of students wearing white veterinary lab coats holding their dogs, cats, ferrets or rabbits in their arms. Placards beneath the pictures gave descriptions like: “Second-year student Tyler Miller and his border collie, Jamie” or “Fourth-year student Samantha Hess and her weimaraner, Olive, and her cat, Toby.” The pictures made me smile — they were reflections of pure pet-pride. They made me miss my cat.

Near the end of the hallway Dr. Lampa stopped in front of a door and swung it open for me. “Here we are,” he said. “This is where we’ll be talking with you today.”

I stepped through the doorway into a white room with a long wooden table in the center of it. A woman with glasses and curly, silvery hair was sitting on one side of the table. She stood up as we entered.

“Kate, this is Dr. Susan Noh. She’s a professor and researcher for the Allen School for Global Health,” Dr. Lampa said.

“Hi, Kate, come on in. Nice to meet you,” Dr. Noh said, “Have a seat.”

Dr. Noh and Dr. Lampa settled down on one side of the table and I sat down across from them. I crossed my legs in my chair and straightened the front of my blazer.

“Okay, so, I guess we’ll just get started with our first question for you,” Dr. Lampa said. “Would you mind just telling us a little bit about yourself, Kate?”

And they both looked across the table at me.

* * *

The person that I was before I met Daniella would have quavered at this moment. She would have been filled up with the same kind of buzzy static that she gets upon waking every morning. She would have seen this interaction as a chance to sink or swim. She would have worried about how to act in that white room because the people sitting across from her didn’t *know* her.

* * *

But I have been given a mighty gift.

In that moment it didn’t matter that the interviewers didn’t know me. Because *I* know me, now. Know finally and firmly:

I am Kate. I like Van Morrison. I like reading books like *Sidereus Nuncius*. I like Caliban. I like blazers that look like they’re from the sixties. I like drooly dogs. I (pretend to) like bad boys. I like when my cat squashes my chest. I like learning about other people’s stories. I say “oh my gosh” a lot but I always mean it. I like listening to Daniella. And I am learning to connect even if it scares me because there is simply too much to learn, too many stories to hear. I am learning to speak louder. I am learning to think about my role as someone who can be a part of bigger things. I am learning to like

myself — and I am learning to stop relying on A's or winnings or outside praise to do that. I am carrying around my own medic pack. I am learning to be brave.

And I have only just woken up.

Author's Biography:

Kate Spies was born in Portland, Maine on March 10, 1993. She was raised in Topsham, Maine and graduated from Mt. Ararat High School in 2011. Kate is majoring in English with a minor in Pre-Medical Studies. She was a three-year athlete with the University of Maine's cross country and track teams. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, the All Maine Women Honors Society, and the Ewe-Maine Sheep Club at the Witter Farm.

Upon graduation, Kate will attend the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine, where she plans to explore her interests in animal health, human health, and communication — and how all three intersect.