

Alone

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Patches of clouds hover over the Swiss city of Lucerne as I climb cold cement steps. At this moment the endless set of stairs and the top of the hill that is barely within sight make up my entire world. The schedule in my backpack and the map tucked into the back of my notebook are no longer of any concern to me. As I listen to the silence, I am comforted by the light thump of my feet upon the dank steps. I am alone and savor every moment that I spend in the hills of Lucerne.

With each minute that passes, an appreciation of the experience grows; at the age of only seventeen, I have the beauty and magnificence of Switzerland within my grasp. Throughout the past week, I have toured Swiss cities alongside eleven of my classmates, seeing the most beautiful scenery, visiting famous attractions, shopping at high-end stores, and dining at European restaurants. In order to crunch a month's worth of activities into two weeks, the group has had a tight schedule. Although each experience has been amazing, they have all been filled with the group leader's voice constantly repeating, "We only have fifteen more minutes ... ten minutes until the train leaves ... five minutes left to eat your lunches."

The ferry ride took much longer than expected. My Girl Scout troop fidgeted in the seats of our ferry, as we waited anxiously for our arrival at George's Island in the Boston Harbor. When we finally arrived, our first mission was to find a nice place for a picnic. With everyone's stomachs grumbling, all of the girls wanted to stake out the first available piece of dry grass. Not wanting to keep my group from enjoying their ham sandwiches as soon as possible, I agreed on whatever place they wanted to sit. However, during this entire time, I could not stop thinking

about all of the beautiful, hidden places that must have been scattered throughout the island, perfect spots to relax and enjoy our lunches.

My decision to climb the steps that led to the residential areas of Lucerne meant that I had to abandon the schedule that designates these hours for shopping and eating in the busy city streets. Although I am missing the opportunity to purchase postcards and souvenirs, I know that I am in the midst of discovering something much greater than the little gift shop that attracts every tourist that walks into the city. I am uncovering something unknown, something that is not blocked into the list of times and locations.

During the sweltering summer of 2003, I spent almost every afternoon walking or biking with friends through the densely settled woods of Breakheart Reservation. Each day we would walk or bike a mile or two along our set paved path and end at the always overcrowded lake. One humid day in late July, my friends were committed to family events and could not make the trip to the lake. Instead of lounging on the couch for the entirety of the day, I decided to bike on the path alone.

I mounted my bike and rode along the winding path. As I pedaled, I noticed a unique silence and peace that did not exist during my past rides. The call of the flowers that had never been heard over the din of a group of teenage girls could now be heard loud and clear. The rocks were no longer just lumps of stone that studded the pathway. Instead, they were pieces of the earth with many crevices and nooks. Each had its own unique shape and color; like snowflakes, no two were alike. I could not ride past the bushes without thinking of the many families of animals that must have inhabited the shelter of twigs and leaves. The canopy of shade the trees

provided no longer went unnoticed. The number of years the trees must have been rooted in their spots suddenly became unimaginable. After that bike ride, I felt a sense of satisfaction that sprang from the tranquility and beauty that I had discovered in the woods that I had always overlooked when my friends rode by my side.

Despite my shortness of breath, I still have over half the flight of stairs left to climb before I reach the top. Unforgettable images of the past week flash in my mind - skiing in the Swiss Alps, visiting the zoo, attending classes at the local school, living with a Swiss family. Although each experience was different and memorable in its own way, no memory belonged to me alone; each one of my classmates will also always have these memories. This time, however, I am creating an experience that belongs only to me. My legs begin to ache with each and every step, but I know I must be nearing the top.

Boston is a crowded city full of people who are always in a hurry to catch the train or to make an important interview. Despite the fact that I had lived twenty minutes from Boston for my entire life, I never truly explored the secrets of the city. Whether I had a doctor's appointment or made a trip to the Museum of Fine Arts, I had always ventured into the city with family members or friends, never alone. Only six months prior to my trip to Switzerland, I decided to wander into the city and walk the busy streets that I had merely rushed through before.

From a bench in Boston Common, I saw all sorts of people, some running with their dogs and others walking to work. A man in an expensive blue suit sporting a gold watch ran by me with his brief case in his left hand as his right hand ran through his gelled brown hair. Behind him, an older woman wearing tan Velcro shoes hobbled along. Perhaps the man was a lawyer

and rushing off to the courthouse, or maybe he was on his way to the courthouse due to his amassed number of unpaid parking tickets. Maybe the woman had a doctor's appointment for the arthritis in her 1 knee, or maybe she was meeting her daughter, whom she had not seen in three years, for lunch. Unlike all of these passing people, I did not have a destination. I was alone and allowed myself to become an unmoving rock in a fast-flowing river of the city.

The top of the hill and the last few steps are finally within view. As I near the last step, I become anxious to see what I have worked so hard to reach. I take a deep breath and feel the cool, icy air rush into my lungs. For the first time in a week, I put my camera in my backpack in order to allow my eyes to observe everything firsthand, rather than through the obstruction of a small camera lens. Looking at every inch of my surroundings, I realize that I have discovered a frosted garden that glistens in the sunlight. At the mercy of the bitter February weather, all of the flowers have disappeared, and the few plants that have not disintegrated into the frozen soil look beaten by the harsh winds. Even without the colorful petals and green leaves, the garden still maintains a unique serenity that I have never felt before. I sit down on the cold, metal bench and lay my eyes upon the most breathtaking panorama that I have ever seen. Tall, snow-capped peaks of the Swiss mountains sparkle beneath the crystal blue sky. Down in the valley, the vast Lake Lucerne is sprawled out before me in all its beauty. While I gaze at the grand vista, I forget the demands of the tight schedule, the tours, and the crowds. All that exists at this moment are the grand mountains and lake.

I look at my watch and decide that I must return to the group. As I walk down the endless number of steps, I reflect on my experience. I don't have a picture of that beautiful view, but stop short of turning around in order to capture the magnificence of my secret garden. I stop myself

because I know that if I return, the mountains, the lake, and the view of the city would not hold the same radiating peace. I would run up the steps, fumble for my camera, and destroy the tranquility that exists in that garden.

When I return to the hectic streets, I find my classmates waiting in front of the rows of shops, each holding bags full of souvenirs in each hand. Although I do not have a mug or a sweatshirt to remember my journey alone, I have memories and a sense of tranquility. Through the years, the details of the icy garden and the magnificent view will remain with me, and each and every time I picture the beauty of this secret garden, my imagination will bring me back to this frozen February day that I spent alone in the Swiss hills.