Abandoned

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I come from a family of two children. My roommates, most of whom have at least four siblings, can recall stories of being left behind at the grocery store, the park, church, etc. I was never left behind.

I remember getting lost, of course. That vortex feeling of not seeing my mother anywhere when I was standing in the middle of a big crowd at the county fair. Mom had been trying to point out to me someone we knew, and so I stopped to look for them, but she continued on. She came back very quickly, but if there had been more children in my family, it is possible that she may not have remembered about me. And so it wasn't until I went to college that I really knew what it was like to be left behind.

On the last week of my eight-week study abroad trip to London, we took a bus to Scotland. On the way, we stopped in York, where there wasn't much to interest me. The whole town smelled of a combination of formaldehyde and a cattle ranch. That is one of the things I will forever remember about York.

We visited the Jorvik Center, which is on the site of an archaeological dig made between 1976 and 1981 that revealed the original Viking city that was the ancient ancestor of modern York. Part of the experience of the Center is to hop onto a slow-moving motorized carriage that takes you in a circle around the dig. The city has been re-created so there are moving dummies wearing homespun and yelling at you from
all sides. At one point during the ride, the carriage slows down as you pass the Viking toilet. What it was, essentially, was a tall wicker basket that a Viking would squat in. The archaeologists had dug one up and set a dummy up on it and had him grunting and making an obnoxious smell: a condensed version of the smell that permeated the whole city. The only other point of interest in York was the Starbucks where a few of us spent three hours of a rainy day.

We were staying in the dorms at the University of York, and I remember walking around campus one night and seeing a courtyard completely flooded with water and ducks wandering across the top of it. It was raining and I was under an awning, so I felt protected and sort of thrust into a three­dimensional painting.

We were to leave at 8:30 in the morning to start the last leg of the trip to Edinburgh. I woke at 8:00 and got ready in my room, taking my time. When I went downstairs, I found that not a soul of our group was to be found. I asked the steward at the front desk if the BYU group had checked out already and he told me that they had, but the bus would still be in the parking lot behind the dorms. I left, backpack on, dragging my roller-suitcase behind me, and reached the parking lot, which was full of cars.

I saw one bus turning onto the motorway and another coming toward the parking lot from another driveway, but the tall, bright red bus that I was to look for was not there waiting. I assumed that it must be in another parking lot, so I walked around, looking for that. When I couldn't find it, I returned to the front desk and asked the steward if there was another place that the bus could possibly be hiding. He told me no and began making jokes about me finding a job in York, or maybe transferring schools and living in the dorms.

I found a list of emergency phone numbers in my purse and after leaving various messages, I sat down to wait.

It didn't really register that I had been left behind. That didn't seem quite possible. I assumed that someone was playing a trick on me and that the forty students, three professors, and their families were around the corner, waiting for me.

An hour later, when one of the professors rushed through the door and, only addressing the steward, grabbed my bag and expected me to follow, I began to go bright red in my embarrassment and remorse. They had forgotten me and it took someone receiving the message back in London and calling one of the cell phones on the bus to remind them that I was there.

There were two ways for me to take this incident. One (the understanding,
reasonable approach): The group was composed of forty college students and a few professors. How could they possibly have noticed that one person was missing? And two (the self-pity approach): Out of fifty individuals, not one had realized that I was alive and they were leaving me to rot in York. My professor even said had they been any further away, they would have left me there and picked me up on their way back from Scotland.

When I stepped onto the bus, everyone applauded. Calling them foul names in my head, I bowed and took a seat by myself in the front. I don't usually cry, especially not when I think that anyone will see me, but I was in tears within five seconds of sitting down.

I don't really remember much else about York. There are a few things that stand out, but mostly I remember being left in the dorms at the University of York, breathing in the foul smell of a city that hadn't impressed me much.

That day we reached Hadrian's Wall, a 73-mile long, 8-foot thick wall constructed around AD 122 by Roman legionnaires. The Roman army was full of skilled craftsmen, who might have suspected that one day they would be sent off by their government to guard the wall in the bitter cold of winter, when they couldn't see twenty feet ahead of them.

As I stood at the top of the hill that the ruins are seated on, looking over the countryside picturesquely dotted with sheep and trees, I thought of who I was and where I was. My grandfather is Scottish and so my ancestors were the Picts, the ones whom the Romans had driven off and were trying to keep out of England when they built that wall. After three attempts at breaching the barrier Hadrian had built to keep them out, the Picts finally succeeded in reclaiming their native land at the end of the second century AD. It struck me that part of me came from those strong Picts. I was standing on the wall that had been built to keep my people out. I wondered if those ancestors of mine, with their painted faces (the word Pict is thought to come from the Latin pictus: to paint) would approve of me, or if they would hold me in contempt because they don't think that I fight my battles well.

My reverie didn't last long. We had to board the bus and continue on our way to Edinburgh, where we spent two days. On the night of our second day, everyone separated to check out the Fringe Festival, where various types of plays—from Greek tragedy to modern comedy—are performed. The artists who perform in these plays throughout Edinburgh during the weeks of the Fringe Festival (advantageously organized to coincide with the Military Tattoo, which draws around 217,000 people every year) are not required to audition. I
think that says something.

One of our professors had brought his family, including his fifteen-year-old daughter, to Edinburgh. I had arranged to meet some friends that evening to see a small production of *Cyrano de Bergerac* and she asked to come with me.

On our way from the Royal Bank of Scotland to the venue, we got lost. I had a small map, but it didn't include every street, so we wandered in the rain (it was constantly raining in Edinburgh) until we found a large venue, host to ten plays every hour. It wasn't the one we were looking for, but we decided that, rather than miss out on an experience we might never have again, we would find one that sounded good. Someone recommended one that had the word “Pineapple” in the title. Perhaps that should have told me something—I'm not sure. We paid our £6.50 (roughly $13 that summer) and sat in the front row.

The play began with three men coming out and spoofing on various films. I recall that one was a spoof on *Star Wars*, though I don't remember exactly what made it funny. We must have sat through eight of these spoofs when the three men came out in bathrobes to do a parody of a Woody Allen porn film, though they didn't come right out and say it—no, they didn't need to when they took off the robes to reveal that they were wearing simply black cardboard dots over a central area of their anatomy.

Kristen and I were in the front row, four feet away from the actors, and the door was at the opposite end of the room. We could have walked out. I learned something about myself that night when I convinced myself that it was okay to stay. We put our fingers in our ears and closed our eyes, hoping it would be over soon, but we stayed. I should have been the responsible one and I know this. I was the one who should have said, “We should leave,” and when Kristen would have said, “What if they yell at us from the stage?” (there had already been plenty of interaction with the audience), I would say, “It doesn't matter. When we leave here, we'll go back home across an ocean and will never see a single one of them again.” I should have stood up for my principles, but I was too timid to be responsible. I allowed my morals to abandon me, waving goodbye as they left. You can learn something from most bad experiences, even ones involving nearly naked men.

I was walking through campus the other day when one of the professors from this trip saw me and, after our preliminary “hellos,” she said, “I still feel so bad about leaving you in York,” and all I could think to say was, “No worries.”