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The Ephemeral Bloom

By Robbieana Leung

The dainty Spanish buildings, adorned with Christmas wreaths and sparkle, towered regally on my left and right, as I walked down the narrow corridors and side streets in Cadiz. Below the balconies, traced by a delicately painted door with flowery carvings and soft pastel bay windows, were many shops. Leather and laced boots! Shiny leather purses! Wine packaged into fancy glass bottles of every size! Classy boutiques for men and women! Children's toy stores marked by various plastic animal rides! Rebellious jewelry and global artifacts! People flocking as they shuffle through stores with frenzy! Indeed this was Shopper's Paradise, fun for the whole family! For the next four days, this was my resort, but for me it was not quite the cloud number nine that my friends were flying on.

My stay in Utopia, as my shoppaholic friends would call it, consisted of participating in Mission Impossible 4: Finding them the most reasonable, fashionable boots ASAP! It was not very exciting. Dash in! Dash out! Quick! Try on more boots before siesta hits! Forty-eight hours and twenty pairs of shoes later, my friends were bootless. Instead, their hands were full with Zara and Sfera shopping bags, and other purchases that, when poured into their cabin, carpeted the entire floor and even their beds. Hundreds of Euros manifested themselves in clothes, jewelry and makeup spilling from every end of their room. This scene echoed what I had seen in the streets of Cadiz - every stray glance to a corner of the street revealed Semester at Sea students clinging to bundles of purchases, which ornamented each finger like rings. Every step into a store returned an experience of girls grabbing shoes, dresses and shirts in the rush to the cashier. This was not a display of necessity or a mere quest to buy a few souvenirs to bring back home. This was indulgence. Full out indulgence.

The only thing that salvaged my mood was looking up at the beautiful balconies, where wet laundry hung, billowing in the breeze; where bikes parked themselves for siesta and where flowerpots holding childish smiling flower windmills sat. Staring up at the verandas occasionally rewarded me with an adorable dog peeking through its railings, or a curious citizen watching the

scurry below, as people rushed in and out of stores, hands stuffed with plastic bags with designer names, oblivious to their gaze. Despite its stillness and silence, to me real life happened in these terraces – traces of people unabashedly left out on display, giving the buildings character and breath. It was beautiful and lively, although peacefully tranquil, and transcendent of time, enduring even past the hours of siesta. The illuminations that shone through the windows that skyscrapered above me were brighter and more uplifting than even the Christmas lights that suspended in midair, dazzling each street with a different festive pattern and filling its pedestrians with spurts of warmth and comfort.

After failing the Mission for the third day in a row, I returned to my cabin. As I shoved my water bottle and a few papers from my empty bed onto my empty desk, I was perplexed. I did not understand how quickly my friends had readjusted to consumer life. One question persistently penetrated my thoughts. It was my unasked question directed to my friends: How much has time changed you? Once upon a time, these same friends told me that after seeing such poverty port after port, they could not bring themselves to splurge on unnecessary, materialistic shopping. They told me heartfelt stories of frayed children they had met, and of ragged beggars, who pleaded for things ranging from spare change to a hair tie. They told me of the times they had gone to home stays, where their hosts and hostesses had given them their best: a tattered mattress versus the floor and a hot steamy meager meal versus the scraps of leftovers. My same friends, who now stood before me with shopping bags spilling from each hand, had been so content with so little before...what had happened? As my days in Spain wore on, their poignant testimonies evaporated and were traceless. Now they were engulfed in memory lapse as they purchased their happiness, false happiness.

What had happened? Why did returning to Europe resurrect their old consumer selves with such adroit ease? It was so perplexing. Leaving San Diego, to rich Japan and Hong Kong, as we eased our way into poorer Asian regions of China, Vietnam, Burma, then Middle Eastern countries of Egypt, Turkey, and then back to richer parts of the world as we entered Europe was more than just a route. It was an entire metaphor for easing in and out of things. It was about making transitions easier: easing out of wealth, into poverty, and back into wealth; easing in and out of culture and lifestyle shock – symbolic of us easing out of what we have learned and were once

moved by. Only time will distinguish the strong ones that remember their experiences and act to better the world, from those who will be crushed by selfish societal norms that cause them to squeeze back into the mould of their old selves prior to the voyage.

Wincing inside I tried to ignore the other question that pounded from my mind to my soul, with relentless strength. How long - I tried to distract myself - before you - quickly, think about something else - change, too? - The question was too crushing to block out - When will you unravel, becoming unchanged and indifferent by the last past four months, like your friends? What will be the catalyst, if not shopping, that steals from you? The words spat and stung me. I hoped and prayed with all that I was, that time would not prove a similar fate of the common traveler: see novel things and be filled with temporary passion for activism and social justice, which is dispersed the moment the threshold is crossed and returns home, where he or she is loosely tied to memories that evoke small jolts that awaken the heart for but a moment. My biggest fear was returning home with a PowerPoint slideshow of my pictures, casually displaying beautiful and tortured faces of people from around the world, strung together with fun anecdotes, yet forgetting the names and the warmth from the smiles of my young and old mentors who had changed me.

Maiko San, Yuka San, Yuske, Hiro, Xiao Li, Ling, Truong Dung Civi, Mohammad, Hebba, Amir, Ali, Bora...Whew. The names are still there...the memories are still as alive today...how long will it take before I...

I do not want to forget. I do not want months, weeks or a couple of minutes to rob me of what I have learned on this voyage. I do not want one experience to move me for a mere moment, but instead for life! I want to hold on to that desperate call to activism, fueled so strongly once by the cries of pained people, the blank stares of young children that screamed with unspoken words, the laughter of SAS students connecting to children from different worlds...The day when I am surprised that the fading echo, barely reverberating a once assertive statement I had made, "I am truly fortunate to have been blessed with so much...I will not take it for granted anymore" is my own voice is the day I will die a little inside, numbed at my own apathy.

Hopefully, the days I have spent with foreign angels will never depart in liveliness or memory even though the passion for activism that I was filled with may. Hopefully, the refreshing delightful fragrance of life's perfume that my friends from around the world have saturated me will not effervesce and disappear in time, but sweeten. Among the withering flowers I see around me, I want to be the one that blooms: The rose that majestically shines like the balconies that sparkle and light up the city, even after the shops are closed, everyone goes to sleep and the Christmas season comes to an end.