

Tasha

This is *so* not a good idea.

I'm barely five minutes into my first class of the semester when it hits me just how bad an idea this is. Sure, it's not "getting into the hot tub with Tyler Trask while the cameras are rolling" bad, but then what is? I would have to search the world for the people who decided Crocs were a cute shoe concept before I found an idea as bad as *that*, but taking my semester abroad placement at Oxford University when I barely scrape a 3.0 GPA? Way up there on the dumb-ass rankings.

"... By now, you'll all be familiar with the basic texts on the reading list..."

I glance down at the dense two-page list they included in my exchange information pack, full of titles like *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, and have

to remind myself to breathe. I only arrived in England a couple of days ago, but apparently hell waits for no girl, even if she's suffering killer jet lag.

"... And we've got a new face with us. Natasha Collins, welcome."

My head jerks up, and I look around to find the group staring at me. Instead of the packed, anonymous lecture halls I'm used to back home, I'm sitting in a dim, wood-paneled room, one of a group of just ten students balanced on battered couches and overstuffed armchairs.

"Would you like to introduce yourself?" Professor Susanne Elliot asks, her salt-and-pepper hair falling around a face that, back home, would have been Botoxed into oblivion.

"Umm, sure," I begin. "I'm Tash—Natasha," I correct myself. I keep forgetting, Tasha is no more: the version of myself I left giggling and drunk in that hot tub. "I'm here from UCSB for the semester."

"UCSB?" Elliot repeats, frowning. Yep—definitely no Botox.

"University of California?" I explain hesitantly. "I go to school in Santa Barbara."

"Oh." Elliot seems surprised. She shuffles her papers, searching for something. "We don't usually exchange with that university."

"It was a kind of last-minute thing." I begin to pick the clear varnish on my thumb nail and ignore the amused looks my classmates are exchanging. I don't know why they have to be so snobby about it. I mean, sure, it's not

Stanford, but the UC system is totally second tier!

“Santa Barbara,” the professor repeats. “And what were you studying there?” She looks over her thin wire-rimmed glasses at me.

“I’m . . . undeclared.” My discomfort grows. Technically that’s not quite true, but if I’d told the Global Exchange crew what my classes were, they’d have put me on some kind of international blacklist and branded me unfit for study.

“Well.” She pauses. “Welcome to Oxford. I’m sure you’ll find Theory of Politics very . . . interesting.” She moves on to talk about research-paper schedules, but I catch the slight smirk all the same.

Sinking back in my seat, I sneak a look at my classmates. Dressed in an assortment of preppy sweaters, Oxford shirts, and neat jeans, they look totally at ease: nodding along and exchanging familiar smiles, but then again—they would. They’ve all spent the past year and a half bonding over dusty library books and term papers while I was five thousand miles away, blowing off classes to hang at the beach and shop. I may have a great tan and awesome bargain-hunting skills, but somehow I don’t think those will count for much here.

“. . . So I suppose that’s all. Any questions?” Professor Elliot looks at us expectantly.

I had plenty. “*What the hell am I doing here?*” for a start and “*Why didn’t I just go volunteer in Guatemala like my mom suggested?*” I’d been so focused on getting out of California, I hadn’t really thought about what

would come next.

“I have one.” The sporty blond girl beside me raises her hand a little. “Will we be starting with power theory or basic ideological distinctions?”

I blink.

“I thought I’d leave that up to you. Everyone?”

They all pitch in with enthusiastic suggestions while I smooth down my denim skirt (which is officially three inches shorter than anything my classmates probably own) and wish for the twenty-eighth time since my flight landed that I could take it all back. Not the “leaving the States” part, of course. That was a given. I mean, Christmas in L.A. was bad enough (with Mom and the stepdad alternating their silent treatment with plenty of “we’re so disappointed in you” lectures), but when I got back to school, the gossip was worse than ever.

So what could I do? I didn’t want to just drop out of college. I may have chosen keg parties over studying and put more thought into first-date outfits than any of my papers, but I’m no quitter. And more than that, I couldn’t stand the symbolism—if I dropped out, it would look like it really had all been my fault. Ever since Tubgate, I’d been walking around with a smile on my face, pretending I was cool with what they were saying. The whispers. The tabloid lies. Dropping out altogether would be like admitting I felt dirty and ashamed, and there was no freaking way I would give them all that satisfaction.

So even though the semester had already started, I begged the exchange program, calling that stuck-up administrator every day until she finally broke down and

told me that they'd had a mix-up with some girl at Oxford who still needed a spot. And although I didn't meet their oh-so-high Ivy League grade requirements, she could let me go if it was a straight swap: my classes for hers, my roommate for her dorm. School hadn't even started back over there, so I wouldn't miss a day. Nearly three whole months in England. Perfect.

But now I'm stuck in a room full of people who were probably high-school valedictorians instead of spirit-squad captains; I'm struggling to even follow the intro talk, let alone the classes themselves, and I have to ask myself . . .

Is this really so much better?

By the time our not-so-welcome welcoming talk is over, I've made a mental note to buy a "Beginner's Guide" to political theory. According to Elliot, I have three days to prepare my first paper, which will then be offered up to my classmates for discussion. Three days! *National Geographic* shots of feeding piranhas flood my mind, and I add yet another note to my schedule: find out where the library is. Somehow, I don't think my usual tactic of cribbing from Wikipedia and the fruits of Google will cut it with this crowd.

Pulling on my fur-trimmed parka, I follow the other students out onto the icy main quad. It turns out that "Oxford University" is a collection of a couple of dozen separate colleges, scattered across the city. I'll be living and studying in Raleigh College: a group of sandstone buildings set back from the riverbank. I walked around

the campus yesterday, and this place is totally gorgeous. Dorms, dining hall, and an old chapel are arranged around these tiny cobbled courtyards, and there are neat lawns and gardens all around. It's pretty for sure, but in this weather, I can't help wishing they'd added heating to the sixteenth-century stone cloisters. Even my favorite Uggs can't keep me warm in this.

Speaking of which . . . the way my classmates are treating me is giving the weather competition in the sub-zero stakes. Snatches of their conversation drift back to me in the cold wind, but nobody so much as acknowledges my existence.

"Coming to Hall later?" one of the boys asks, pushing back his floppy dark hair.

"No, I've got to revise for my collection," a brunette girl answers, her hair fixed in this weird semi-back-combed ponytail. I'd find it easier to understand if they were speaking Spanish, thanks to my core language requirement and four years of high school "*Me llamo*"-ing, but right now I'm clueless.

"I'm thinking bin bags for the bop on Friday," the athletic blond adds. OK, so I'm being tactful here; by "athletic," what I really mean is butch. Cropped hair, baggy sportswear, and if that doesn't paint a clear-enough picture for you, she has a rainbow badge on her bulky backpack. Hey, I'm not judging. I just don't see why a same-sex preference has to go hand in hand with complete fashion backwardness. I mean, look at Portia de Rossi: a hot wife and an *Elle* subscription. It can be done!

"Or maybe—" They duck through an archway

into what I think is the mailroom, the old wooden door slamming shut with a hollow thud. I don't try and follow. There's only so much cold shoulder I can take, and besides, I know for sure I won't have any mail. I'll be lucky if my parents send a single card, such is the shame Tubgate brought upon my family—or so my mom says. They're so mad, they're probably redecorating my bedroom as a playroom for my new baby sister-to-be.

Suddenly weary, I weigh the choice between noodles and whatever sludge passes for cafeteria food here. Pulling my jacket tighter, I head for my dorm, squinting against rain now falling in cold slices. I can't take sitting alone in the huge, portrait-lined dining hall again, and at least Ramen noodles will keep me a size four. Tripping up the bare stone staircase, I heave open my door and collapse onto the bed, ready to wallow.

Damp shoes off, sweatpants on, and Joni Mitchell playing low. There. I'm set. Let the wallowing commence.

But just as I'm about to curl up under the covers and wish myself across the ocean, I take a closer look around. Back in Santa Barbara, I share a place with Morgan—it's tiny but in this fun block with other students, super-close to the beach. Here I'm living in a single dorm room; wait, make that a prison cell. Faded gray carpet, a hard twin bed . . . I get up and slowly take it all in.

The plain walls are totally clear save a color-coded study schedule and reading list—pinned to the board so perfectly, she must have used a ruler to arrange them. The desk is set with a sheet of notepaper and two pens at precise right angles. And the nightstand—home to

the universal “goodie drawer”—holds only a container of vitamin pills, a pocket pack of Kleenex, and a small dictionary.

I sink back down on the bed, this time in disbelief. I think of my own apartment, overflowing with junk, clothes, and noise, and then look again at this temple of order and precision.

Emily Lewis. Just what kind of freak are you?

Emily

“... And I was like, ‘No way,’ but she says, ‘Hell yeah,’ so we totally started grinding in the middle of the dance floor! Uh-huh... No... Totally! And, like, he was all crazy jealous... Ha! No, totally!”

I shut my eyes tightly, but when I open them, I’m still here: staring at a wall full of foreign photographs while my new flatmate continues her fascinating analysis of modern sexuality.

“No. Way!” she squeals, perfectly audible even in the next room. “Omigod, I can’t believe you let him do *that!*”

With a sigh, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and survey the task awaiting me. I’ll need cleaning supplies for a start, and some kind of flat edge to scrape the debris off the walls. She probably used Blu-Tack to keep

all this up, and I know what kind of grease marks that will leave. Warming to my project as Morgan keeps up her steady stream of “like” and “totally!” in the next room, I methodically begin to peel the layers of magazine clippings and photographs away, bringing order to the chaos until pale cream walls are revealed beneath, soothing and cool.

“Hey, Em!” Morgan pushes the door open without knocking. She’s cocked her head to trap the phone on her shoulder, halfway done painting her nails a violent shade of raspberry. “We’re heading out to eat—wanna come?”

“It’s fine.” I shake my head quietly. “I need to unpack. But thanks.”

“Sure, cool.” Morgan shrugs, but she doesn’t leave. Instead, she turns to the huge vanity mirror, finishing her nails and then starting on a fresh coat of mascara. Her blond hair has platinum highlights and is twisted into loose ringlets that fall halfway down her back, shining synthetic and bright against her pale-blue tank top. With the tan and careful makeup, she looks only half real—like some kind of perfect doll. And she’s not the only one. This city seems to be home to some sort of junior Stepford experiment.

“No, she’s staying.” Morgan’s voice drops as she turns back to the phone. “No . . . uh-huh . . . no, she’s kinda quiet. I know . . . she’s *cleaning*.”

I ignore her hushed comments and keep working until she leaves, settling into a blissful rhythm of lift, wipe, repeat, and then unpacking my own things, a warm breeze rippling the curtains and a familiar pop song drifting up

from the apartment downstairs but nothing else to break my peace. And, at last, my new room is neat and clean, Natasha's many belongings tucked away under my bed, my clothing and study materials in their place.

There.

I pause for breath, regarding the order I've magicked out of thin air and teen-girl offcasts with a warm glow of satisfaction. I can't concentrate when things are out of place. Everything else about the exchange may be a monumental disaster, but this mess I can control.

My own phone begins to ring, not with the heavy rap music that Morgan's cell has spewed forth a dozen times already today, but a normal beeping tone.

"Hi, Elizabeth." I collapse onto my crisp new bedding and notice a stain on the ceiling I'll have to deal with later.

"Santa Barbara? Emily, have you lost your mind?" My elder sister doesn't waste time with "How was your flight?" pleasantries, her disapproval echoing clearly down the line from England. "It's not even Ivy League! What possible use could it be to waste three months in a school for beach bums and party girls?"

"It's not my fault," I argue, kicking my bare feet in the air. I may as well get in a few toning exercises with the criticism. Constructive use of all available time, that's the key. "Professor Tremain forgot about my application. He didn't send it until after the deadline, and by then all the good schools were booked. I was lucky to get this place at all. They've already started term." I gave silent thanks for whatever slutty prank had sent Natasha fleeing

to England. Morgan had babbled about hot tubs and TV stars when I first arrived, but I'd been too jet-lagged and bitter to pay much attention.

"Lucky?" Elizabeth exclaims. I hear the sound of pans clattering and picture her in her sleek granite kitchen, whipping up a three-course meal after a fifteen-hour shift at the hospital. "You shouldn't have gone at all. Your second year isn't time to slack off, you know. It's when you should be going to extra classes, getting involved in student politics and debate."

"I know." I'd heard this all before. Elizabeth was repeating my father's lecture practically word for word.

"So why jeopardize everything by disappearing?" Elizabeth switches from disapproval to exasperation as a kettle hisses. "I don't understand."

"It's not such a big deal." I neatly avoid the question. "Study-abroad programs are a legitimate enrichment activity. It'll show I'm resourceful and adaptive to change."

"Of course they are." Elizabeth sighs. "But what possible enrichment are you going to find in that place? It's hardly Harvard."

Harvard. Just the mention of it burns. I'm supposed to be there right now, walking through neat red-brick quads to seminars on international relations and political philosophy, surrounded by the most brilliant minds in the country. I had it all planned out, right down to my study schedule and lecture list. The sheet is in my suitcase, tucked inside a travel guide to Boston my father gave me for Christmas. I suppose I won't be needing them now.

“... Will you? Emily?”

“Hmmm?” I blink out of the reverie.

“I was saying that it’s not too late; you could come home. Go back to Oxford.”

“But my place is taken already. The other girl is there.”

“We’d be able to work it out, I’m sure.” Elizabeth munches on something. “Dad said he could find you a room to rent in Oxford until you get your old one back; you could go to all your classes as normal. He would even give you a living allowance.”

“I’m sure he would.”

“Don’t say it like that.” She sighs again. “He’s just concerned. We all are. This isn’t like you at all.”

“And what is like me?” I ask, wary.

“You’re responsible, focused.” Elizabeth tries to make it sound like a good thing. “You wouldn’t just take off and risk your grades, your chance at a good internship.”

“I’ve already applied for the internships, and besides, why is everyone so sure they know what I’ll do? I’m eighteen years old, not some middle-aged spinster!”

“Spinster?” Elizabeth perks up. “Emily, is this about Sebastian? Because—”

“It’s not about him!”

“Fine.” She sighs again. “Just think about it, OK? It wouldn’t be like you were admitting defeat.”

“I’m not coming home,” I tell her determinedly, the memory of Sebastian giving me new resolve. “I... like it here.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” I say carefully. “My roommate is really nice, and there are lots of interesting courses I can take.”

“Oh.” She pauses. “Well, I guess you know what you’re doing. . . .”

“I do.” I finally let my legs drop, thirty repetitions later.

“Then look after yourself. And call Dad. He’s worried.”

“I will. Love you.”

“You too.”

I roll over and catch sight of the exchange information pack on the desk. I haven’t yet brought myself to look at my class schedule, despite what I told Elizabeth. I can only imagine what Natasha—amateur lingerie model and table dancer (according to the photographs on the wall)—was signed up for. Intro to Early Education, probably, or Remedial English.

But flicking through the stapled pages, I see with horror that I’d overestimated her. Film Crit: The Modern Blockbuster? Teen Movies: Brat Pack and Beyond?

The girl is a bloody film major?

I catch a shuttle bus from our apartment and then practically power walk across campus to catch the international office before it closes. It’s one thing to alienate my family, risk my chance of a top-five law firm internship, and voluntarily spend twelve weeks in a confined space with Morgan, but take that joke excuse for a class schedule? Even I have my limits.

All around me, tanned and happy students are sauntering in the sunshine, completely oblivious to my plight. It's a mass of activity I'm still adjusting to; there are four hundred undergraduates at Raleigh, but here they number closer to twenty thousand. I've gone from recognizing every face I pass to being completely lost in a sea of tanned strangers.

But to my surprise, I don't feel as alone as I expected. In fact, weaving my way through the crowds, the ocean sparkling in the distance, I find a strange sense of satisfaction begin to form. This anonymity, this freedom, is something new for me. I can't cross the Raleigh campus without somebody stopping me to talk about classes or events, but here nobody shows a flicker of interest as I speed by. I could be anyone, not just Emily Lewis, future lawyer and study fiend, the person I have been half my life. As far as anyone here knows, I could be somebody who usually does things like this: a girl who takes off to the other side of the world, a reckless adventurer.

Reckless . . . I have to give a hollow laugh at that. The first truly adventurous thing I do in my entire life, and it's because of a boy. Pausing in the afternoon sun, I remember my sister's comments and what Sebastian had said, just a week ago, the night he broke up with me. Because I was a control freak. Because I was afraid of intimacy. Because the conversation was taking place *on* my bed, instead of *in* it, wearing more clothing than he would have liked. Other girls would have gone out and spent too much money on a low-cut dress or cut their hair off to show how spontaneous they were, but not me. No, I had

to pick up the phone the very next morning when that Global Exchange lady rang, and I had to tell her yes. Yes to the last-minute switch. Yes to California. Get me out of England.

As much as I—and my liberated, post-third-wave feminist self—hate to admit it, my sister was right. This is all because of Sebastian.

Ignoring the dull fear in my chest that comes whenever I think of what he said, I cut past a group of boys in too-low denim tossing a Frisbee around and push into the air-conditioned cool of the International Students building. It didn't matter how I ended up here: I'm stuck. Until April. I suppose I might as well make sure I get a proper education while I'm here, at the very least.