

To the only constant in my life
To the beautiful souls for whom my
love will never *change*

...to my family

Mom, Dad, Karim, Ronnie and Romeo
thank you for molding me into the
lady I can be proud of today.
I am only the product of the waves of
love and support that I drown in from
you, every day.
I hope the cruise of life keeps us sail-
ing side by side...

...this book is for you



How Do

19TH APRIL

You Feel?



51.1657° N, 10.4515° E

I IS THIS IT? Is this where we say goodbye?

I turned around for a last look at what I had called home for four months. That was when I couldn't deny it any longer - it was over. I walked away from the World Odyssey, the ship that had housed more than 900 beautiful souls during the voyage around the globe. The huge, beautiful white vessel, with blue sunshades sprinkled on its decks; it was hard taking my eyes off of it, let alone saying goodbye to the feeling of comfort of having its grandeur spread across my eyes.

Walking from one home to another, it was a tug of war between the grief of leaving the ship and the joy of returning to Beirut. But being at the last port of my transformative journey, it meant that I was able to see my mother again.

After wishing farewell to all the friends I made, we parted ways to rejoin our families. I stood there looking around me: students and parents reuniting, and luggage scattered everywhere across the floor. It was total chaos, but a moment that melted my heart. Spotting my mother in the distance, I ran directly towards her. It felt like I was in a movie. It had been incredibly long since I had seen her, the longest I had ever been apart from her.

“Mom!” I yelled at the top of my lungs, giving her a big hug. We looked at each other, a little lost at where to begin, what to say first. She was looking at a woman with a thousand stories. She wanted to learn about the world through my eyes and ears. I, on the other hand, couldn’t believe that I was back to my normal life, back to family and friends. Memories rushed back to the day I applied and got accepted to Semester at Sea, like it had only been a week.

“This is a dream,” my mom whispered as we scrolled through the page of the website. The page consisted of a ship that moved around, from top to bottom, from one country to another, showing

us the rich itinerary of a promising voyage, called Semester at Sea.

“What could I possibly be getting myself into?” I wondered as I read the tiny font on the website.

Aside from it being a dream come true, I learned that Semester at Sea (SAS) was a study abroad program that offers 600 students, from all over the world, the opportunity to take university courses on a cruise ship. A ship that travels to eleven different countries in only 104 days. My jaw dropped when I read the details! A rather normal reaction from someone who *loves to* travel, if you ask me. Imagine doing it with 600 other students, on a cruise ship!

Almost a year had passed since I first encountered the program. At that point, Semester at Sea was merely the stuff of dreams.

“How brilliant would it be if I could go on that?” I occasionally thought some mornings right after waking up.

Luckily, I was able to secure a job towards the end of my studies, which would start eight months after my graduation. But being a girl who needs a

crystal-clear idea of what the immediate future would look like, I stressed out over what I would do during the eight months between graduation and my new job. It felt like an unforgivably big chunk of free time, more than half a year that I had nothing planned, with no real purpose to fuel myself.

Desperate not to spiral into a dreadful hole of nothingness, I spent the next few weeks doing research on exciting programs I could join, and most importantly, programs that my parents would approve. But I grew hopeless by the day, struggling to find anything that piqued my interest. Until... one day, my mom asked me, out of the blue, "What happened to that program we once read about? The one at sea?"

I jumped out of my seat.

"I cannot believe you are back. I am so glad you are no longer in the middle of the ocean," my mom said, hugging me tightly. The sheet on my bed, the walls of my room, the different people that I met... With every tight hug produced a new image would flash across my eyes. My mind scrolled through four months of memories all in one go.

“Quick! Let’s get to the hotel and freshen up. You must be very tired. I can’t wait to hear all about your experience, we have a lot to talk about!”

This wasn’t going to be one of those cab rides that I would be on with my friends. That chapter was over. But seeing my mother ecstatic, I found it very hard to wipe the smile off of my face. It was surreal to be back with someone I loved so much. We hopped in a taxi and made it to our hotel. My thoughts were still scattered.

“Is it really over? How could four months pass by so quickly? It sometimes feels like life was playing its games on me,” I kept thinking.

After reaching the hotel and settling in, my mom surprised me with one of my favorite Lebanese biscuits. My home melting inside my mouth seemed like the perfect way to make me feel like I am back in my element.

“How do you feel?” she said with bulging eyes.

I was hit again by reality. This was such a broad question for me to answer. How do I feel? How was

my experience? Where do I begin? I really had no idea how to answer my mom. Showing her some of the pictures I kept in my journal, I thought, was the best solution. I quickly pulled my diary out to show her some of the pictures I took. But looking up, I saw a quizzical look on her face.

Confused, I asked, "What's wrong?"

"I'm surprised you have a journal! It makes me wonder why I never kept one myself," she said.

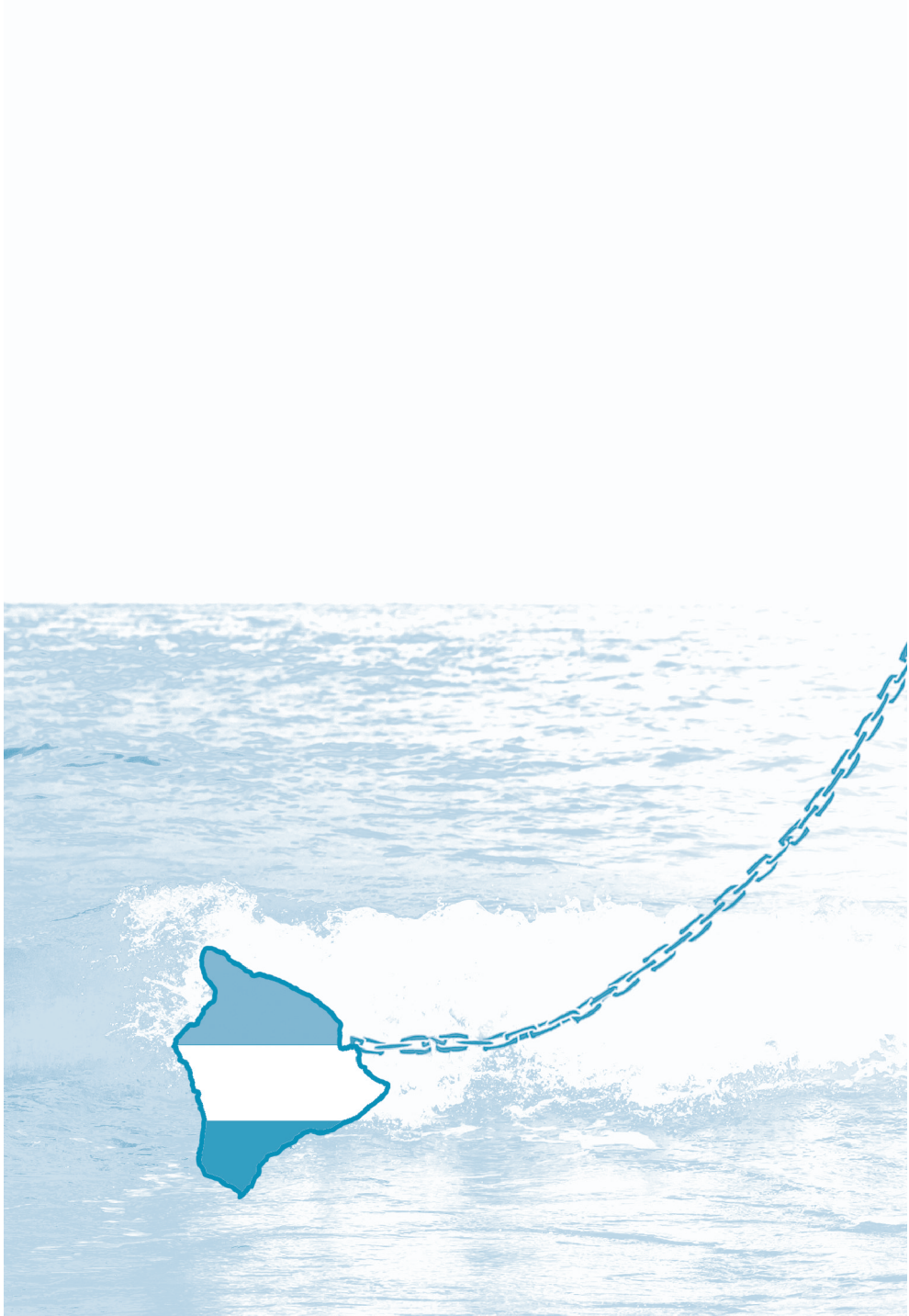
"I'm so glad I did! I kept a record of my whole journey so that I don't let the lessons I have learned and the things I have heard die with me," I said proudly, even though I wasn't the kind of person who would develop habits like that. I pulled out the pictures I kept to show her. But before I could close the book, my mother held my arm and said, "Wait, we should go through it! That way, you wouldn't miss the details." Her eyes shimmered.

In that bittersweet moment, I wasn't sure if I wanted to dive right in. I had only just gotten back from the whole trip. Despite feeling reluctant, I opened the first page with an aching heart,

as memories gushed back to me. The initial lines reminded me of who I was before I went around the world and sent a chill down my spine as I read:

“Have you found yourself yet?”

“I am not sure,” the first lines said.





Carefree

in Hawaii

19.8968° N, 155.5828° W
12TH JAN

Stepping out of the immigration department to the view of the World Odyssey was a moment I will never forget no matter how hard I try. The dazzling beauty of the huge white vessel took my breath away.

“Is this going to be my home for the next few months?” All of us shared in disbelief.

Smiles did not leave anyone’s face, cameras did not leave anyone’s hands. We wanted to capture every moment of our first day, record every emotion we felt.

If I had to describe the ship, I would say it was a floating five-star hotel: nine decks stacked with

splendid rooms, restaurants, halls, gyms, a library, and a cinema. This was literally, anything we could ask for! The ship was massive, to the point where it felt impossible to memorize how to get around.

Of all these places, my most favorite spot, from the beginning until the end of the voyage was the back of the ship – the aft. There, I stood as the ship departed from the first port, feeling liberated and full of life. I was drawn by the sight of the wake that trailed the ship, lines of white that striped the blanket of blue. Watching this scene took my heart away to a place where I felt blessed and at ease. A sensation that is yet to escape my veins.

The first few days, even weeks, on the ship were the hardest. Everyone was adapting to the new environment, getting to know each other, and discovering how things worked. People felt seasick, some homesick and others went with the flow. I must admit though, it wasn't easy for me. Meeting new people from different cultures, introducing myself and trying to give the best impression was a challenge. In the beginning, no place on the ship

felt completely comfort. Wherever I went, it felt like a battle between wanting to be away from everyone, and not wanting to miss out on the fun things that were taking place on board. And if I had to be honest, we had fought this battle throughout the voyage, but we did get used to it by the end.

Of course, the Semester at Sea Institute did their best to help us adapt to our new home. The first few days were stacked with orientations and icebreaker activities.

One of the activities that really touched me was the speech that was given by our Dean, Dan Garvey. During his talk about the world and its citizens, he asked us to stand up every time we agreed with the statements he claimed.

“Stand up if you are the eldest in the family, stand up if you have graduated from college, stand up if this is your first time traveling.” But he captured my full attention when he asked us to, “Stand up if you feel like *your* future is bright,” to which the whole crowd stood up, including me. In fact, graduating with an engineering degree, getting a job in

Dubai, attending programs, such as Semester at Sea did substantially boost my hopes for my future. I had no reason not to get up from my seat.

Happy with the crowd's engagement, Dean Dan continued, "Now, stand up if you feel like *the World's* future is bright."

I turned my head around and was shocked to find out that more than half the people there shared the same opinion as I did. Surprisingly, only a fourth of the crowd stood up.

The first thing that came to my mind, after Dean Dan's statement, were the acts of terrorism so rampant around the world, the technological advancements that were making people lazier and less social, and the natural disasters that destroy the lives of thousands. I couldn't stand up with all these thoughts bouncing in my head. None of this projected to a positive future for the world and I am sure everyone seated felt the same way.

"This is exactly why we come here," our Dean said, breaking the silence inside the room.

“There are two ways you can approach life. The first is by reading books on how you can make it in this world, and the second is by becoming the person who writes those books. I made my choice a long time ago, by first experiencing life, by putting myself through the journey. And it brings me great joy, today, seeing all of you take the same decision, only at a much younger age. The earlier you learn, the longer you get to appreciate life.”

He was beginning to lift the spirits of the people inside the room: “Much like the lessons that were imparted to me from my journey, Semester at Sea will be an experience that will always remain with you. An opportunity for you to find out that the shell we have enclosed ourselves in is, as a matter of fact, not what the rest of the world is like. An opportunity for you to disconnect from all your preconceived notions, and to glean from fresh perspectives. To explore the world, and to ultimately find yourselves somewhere in it.

“Are leaders born or made?”, I asked at a very young age. And now, I have the answer. People who are willing to go out of their way to truly learn about

the world they are living in, end up more enlightened. They understand that no matter our differences, we have more things we share in common. Thus, they show others that if they can project bright futures for themselves, they can surely achieve the same for the rest of the world.

Leaders are made.”

That morning, I remained in my seat for quite some time, reflecting on our professor’s speech. His words inspired me, made me feel like I needed to contribute to the success of our future. Dean Dan had done a terrific job at housing 600 students from all over the globe, by knitting us together with the sole purpose of this great voyage.

I couldn’t wait to become a citizen of the world.

Our journey to becoming global citizens began with a quick stop in Hawaii.

That morning, all the students and faculty members woke up at 5:30 A.M. excited to see the ship docking into the first port. We were prepared to go sleepless for nights, in the name of adventure! We

wanted to live every moment of our journey, and of course, approaching new lands was a must-see.

Getting off the ship after spending a whole week in the sea for the first time made stepping on land feel unusual. “Do you think we will still feel the rocking of the ship on land? I am afraid my body is getting used to the motion of the sea,” my friend reluctantly uttered, as I thought the same thing.

Although Hawaii was only a one-day stop, we were still pumped to find out what our first destination had in store for us. It was the place from which we were “launching” our travel experiences! Things were getting real. We were going to start waking up, every other week, in a new place and experience what hopping from one culture to another was going to be like. I was so ready for all the discoveries awaiting me.

Of all the memories that I can gather from Hawaii, the one that stands out the most was the time I went to the beach. Sinking my feet in the cold and damp sand, my mind was in a state of unprecedented stability. But looking around, it soon caught

my attention that the entire beach was sprinkled with people of different nationalities. And yet, when I closed my eyes, the one thing I would hear was the monotone of carefree joy. A piece of land that accommodated hundreds of people coming from several different walks of life, is that possible?

Hawaii seemed like the heaven future invoked by Dean Dan. It filled me with joy to see that despite coming from different cultures, people still got together and had fun. It was quite a sight to see – students skipped classes to play sports, employees took a day off to enjoy the beauty of the sunset. They didn't wait until they found the perfect moment to appreciate life. Instead, they used every opportunity to make their lives worthy of being appreciated by living in the moment and *together*.

Hawaii, accommodating people from all over the globe, is one of the happiest places I have visited. Witnessing such scenes, I couldn't but approve of Dean Dan's speech over the power of unity in making the world a brighter place. It didn't feel like a hard question to answer.

How could anything come in the way of prosperity, if we are willing to earn it together, and not just as individuals?