

Arrivals

I am seven years old, the brakes of our minivan squealing to a halt before a wide terra cotta porch. Cries break through the heavy, humid air of Alabama in August. Curious children crowd around the moving truck, new friends acquired with an exchange of names, admiration of the bows and arrows bought on the journey south. Together we tear up the stairs, white columns soaring to the heavens as we explore this new land.

I am thirteen, a small palm clutched in each of mine as we emerge, blinking against the gold and vermilion line of the horizon. Two sets of wide blue eyes look to me, and I squeeze these precious hands as we descend the boarding stairs. The moisture is sucked from my face, the tarmac beneath sizzling, even at sunset. “Don’t worry,” I tell my sisters, as we step into the Arizona desert.

I am eighteen. The wide brick paths wind, stately and subdued in the bright morning light, the grass dew-laden and glistening on an April morning. I study the campus map as I approach the crowd of students, here to decide whether this is where they will spend the next four years. Ahead stands a girl in profile, her troubled gaze as uncertain as mine. I don’t know it yet, but she will hate me.

I am twenty-three, the train shaking as it trundles past Mary Poppins chimney pots. Roses climb the fenceposts beneath a heavy-laden sky, raindrops splattering the window as we wind our way north to London. Ahead is a world I have envisioned a thousand times, brought alive by Jane Austen and Richard Curtis but still unknown. By tomorrow, an English boy will be healing my broken heart.

I am twenty-eight. Anticipation rises in my throat as I climb into the cab, my head pounding with each sudden brake. This is the price of twelve

hours of jetlag and a night on the escalators of Hong Kong. The teeming streets of Bangkok pass in a blur of stalls and highrises, the spires of golden temples gleaming behind whitewashed walls. It's been three months since I've seen him, our whirlwind relationship reduced to stolen weeks, our lives on opposite sides of the world and no end in sight.

I am thirty-five, a baby strapped to my chest, a sticky toddler's hand in mine, just like my sisters' all those years ago. It's the smell that hits me: the scents of sweat and diesel, of dust that rises from oche hills and marigold petals scattered outside the Islamabad airport. I stumble back at the wall of roaring humanity, the shalwar kameez of the women glowing like jewels. An alien world I can only hope to make my own.

I am forty-one. By now, they say, my roots should be deep and steady, twining underground and anchoring me in place. But I carry my roots like an orchid, nourished not in soil but air, in the taste of the wind on my lips. The shores of the Rio de la Plata are calling, the palm-lined streets of Buenos Aires beckon. Another arrival awaits.