The Great Krka Falls

*a memoir piece by kimberly syntra*

On fuzzy cobalt blue seats, we watched the sun chasing the bus ever so closely, peeking at us from behind the tall trees, not wanting to reveal itself in its entirety until we reached our destination. I imagined the warmth I would feel when the sun would finally burst out of hiding, casting a dazzling pineapple-gold glow on our skin before enveloping our bodies and filling us wholly with its light; I imagined it’s rays would feel like an angels’ gentle hands, nudging us softly into the blue-green water.

[...]

It was the summer of 2018 when my friend Camila and I boarded a plane to Croatia.

We had just graduated high school, and we were itching to get out of our small, but crowded town and see the things we never had the freedom to discover. Our trip was very last minute - a spur-of-the-moment decision after scrolling on Instagram and being awestruck by an image of the Krka waterfalls in Šibenik, Croatia. Neither of us had seen a place that looked so majestic, radiant, and inviting. We couldn’t get the stunning scene out of our heads, so we thought - why not go there?

[...]

The hike was long and winding and confusing, but the more we continued down the path the louder we could hear the call of the waterfall. It sang to us delicately, like the voice of ten fairies in unison: “you’re almost there, just wait and see; you won’t believe your eyes!” We walked across little bamboo bridges that rattled softly under our weight, over tangled vines that twisted and meandered as they pleased, and through trees of tiny pink lemonade and honey-coloured flowers that dripped from thin branches onto the path. In my mind, an orchestra played a symphony that was building intense anticipation, and Camila and I were in the audience, on the edge of our seats.

Finally, after miles and miles of tiring, yet enchanting hiking, we rounded the corner and came to a clearing in the trees. The narrator in my head cleared his throat, adjusted his tie and announced, “and now, ladies and gentlemen, the moment you’ve all been waiting for”. A trumpet blared, the curtains began to part, slowly, slowly…

I stared blankly.

Maybe it’s because we were from Hamilton, Ontario - the waterfall capital of the world.

Maybe it’s because we had grown up visiting Niagara Falls for friend’s birthday parties, Halloween events, and family trips.

But after the thousands of miles we had flown, the collection of crowded taxis and buses we took down narrow, rambling paths, and the hours we spent trekking through the forest -

Krka falls was just another waterfall.

In fact, it felt like a cheap knock-off of the image we saw on our phone screens; like we planned a trip to Disney World, but got a stuffed Minnie Mouse from the tacky tourist shop 10 miles down the road instead. As if that would somehow suffice.

There was no release, no payoff to the journey we took to get there. And I was suddenly aware of how cold it was. I began to realize that the cool mist I felt prickling on my skin wasn’t just from the falls. It had started to rain. And as I stood there, shivering, looking at the falls in dissatisfaction, all I could focus on was the dirt. I must have pictured soft grass in front of the falls, or possibly a stretch of soft white sand. But no, it was dirt. The rain turned some of it to mud, which splattered on the backs of my shins, and some of it stayed solid, the grainy bits lodged between my frigid toes, making me cringe.

We tried to get closer to the falls and pose for a few photos, but the water was freezing cold and the place was flooded with tourists. A mother scolded a young child, who was squealing like a piglet, trying to get into the water without putting on his lifejacket. A platinum blonde woman with too much lip-filler posed in an impossibly small bikini and a full face of make-up, while a middle-aged bald man took her photo. I watched him try to navigate the slippery, rigid rocks as he cradled his camera like a helpless animal, while the woman tried to stop shivering, looking impatient. I imagined her going home and spending hours editing her photos, trying to get them to match the other over-saturated, artificially-lightened pictures that boasted Krka falls as a “Must See Spot Before You Die”, and I wondered if it was just me that was disappointed.

When we turned to leave, we noticed a tiny food truck around the corner, and we were so cold that we ordered hot chocolate, hoping the familiar sweet treat would warm us up and lift our spirits as much as a hot, sugary drink could. But it took forever for the old woman working solo at the register to get the hot chocolate machine working. And when we finally held the damp Styrofoam cups in our hands, there was no comforting, decadent smell to inhale. The taste was chalky and watered down, with about as much sweetness as a sheet of paper. I looked at the crusty dirt on my flip flops, then back at the drink in my hands, watching the flecks of cocoa powder swim in lazy circles like ducks in a pond.

The rain started coming down thicker and faster, rushing us up the hill back to the buses. We started to run as if we were being chased by a bunch of taunting kids in a school yard. The raindrops fell by my ears, snickering, “Foolish girl, what did you expect?”

[...]

When we came back to our hostel that afternoon, the skies began to clear and so we went to the pool. I began to relax, and a young Italian man on a lounge chair challenged me to an underwater race. He laughed when I told him wearing goggles was cheating, and he lost anyway. After an hour or so of conversing, he asked us what we were doing on the island and we told him we came to see the falls. He said, “and what now?” We really weren’t sure. He laughed some more and rose out of the water, reaching for his turquoise striped towel, then roughly using it to dry his hair.

Before he left, he smiled and said, “Well, I hope you find what you’re not looking for”.

I realize he could have simply mixed up the expression, he spoke several other languages after all - but I wanted to believe he knew exactly what he said. And so, I was quiet for a while, thinking this over, taking it in as the sun shone brightly on my tanned skin.

As the rest of our trip went on, my most joyful memories ended up being the things I never could have anticipated; the simple conversations in the hostel with people from all different ages and nationalities; the curious orange cat that popped up by the pool every now and then like a younger sibling spying on the older kids; the aroma of the bakery down the street selling fresh baguettes and pastries; and the man who sat by the pool in the evening, singing quietly to himself in French, playing the guitar so sweetly I thought I could taste sugar on my tongue.

*What you’re not looking for…*

Yes, that is exactly what I found.