Elliana Arnold

<center>How to Wear a Winter Coat</center>

Even in the cold months, Athens remained a stranger to the violent winds and below-freezing Chicago winters that I was used to. A balmy November breeze brushed my dark strands of hair free from sticking to the cooled sweat lingering on my forehead. The mild wind's welcome touch grazed my back where the sheer, white fabric of my blouse clung to my perspiring skin in a kind of humid hug different from the comfort of a puffer jacket defending from the snow. The heat was just another reminder that I was a visitor here, intruding upon a city older than memory, its timelessness strikingly unfamiliar to someone whose own country was only a couple hundred years old.

Night had descended upon the neighborhood of Monastiraki. The soothing, muted chatter of bustling crowds from the lit-up shops below floated up to where we sat beneath the open sky on the hostel rooftop. I'd come with a group of study abroad friends for a little weekend trip, and as all traveling college students do, we'd chosen our hostel for its central location and low prices–the bunk beds were a compromise, but the rooftop bar was an added plus.

We'd just finished toasting a birthday with colorful cocktails when some Greek university students joined us. The flimsy, metal chairs scraped the concrete floor as we gravitated toward each other's easy smiles and shared English. The three others were visiting Athens, same as us. They wanted to hear about our travels and share their own. I told them about my friend at college whose family hails from Kos. They quickly asked for a picture.

"Ya, she looks Greek," one of them declared, claiming her. He nodded approvingly at the Instagram picture on my screen. My eyes darted between the image and our new friends. I looked for the resemblance–some square jawline or rounded eyes or tall forehead or any similarity that confirmed that she was one of the club. I felt like I was missing something. I settled on believing that perhaps the curve in the ridge of their noses looked similar. Maybe.

One of the students pointed at one of my other friends beside me. "And what is your heritage?"

He didn't hesitate. "Oh, I have some mix of European countries but mainly Irish."

He earned the nod of approval.

"Yes, yes, you look Irish."

One of the others spoke up. "And where are you all coming from?"

A jumbled chorus of "America" came spilling out from every direction with nods of approval faithfully following suite.

Then they turned to me.

I didn't understand their question the first time they asked it. I asked them to say it again.

"And you? Where are you from?"

Confused, I glanced over at my companions, sipping their drinks, unaware of the sudden "otherness" inquiry.

"Oh, well, I'm actually American, too," I reply haltingly, my words tinted with apology. I felt as if I needed to gently side-step their misunderstanding. I told myself there was grace in being apologetic. Apologetic for what, I'm still not quite sure. But that's how I always answered while abroad. When the vendors at the flea market asked in Rome and the waitress at the crepe restaurant asked in Paris and the numerous other curious, well-meaning locals asked from country to country, I always apologized for *actually* being American.

"But where are you *really* from?"

Anything that followed felt like a lie–like an incomplete depiction of who I was. Should I say China even though I spent less than two years of my life there? Even though I can't even speak Mandarin and don't engage with Asian culture besides the annual Chinese New Year celebration? Should I say I was raised Irish Catholic since that was the family I was adopted into? Should I say that I'm from Naperville, or that I'm actually from Chicago since nobody knows where Naperville is anyway? Or should I say I'm from DC since that's where I go to school now?

So I say China because I know that's the answer they're looking for and I get the nod of approval and we all move on except we don't because I think about it all the time.

I internally repeat what I know to be true. Of course I'm actually American. Don't I drink enough Starbucks and listen to enough Taylor Swift and Gracie Abrams? Don't I join every club and job imaginable in the true workaholic spirit of the USA? Aren't I literally getting my degree in English?

I had never felt more exotic than when I traveled through Europe. I peered at the ruins of ancient civilizations, and they peered at me—something new. Someone who didn't have a straight answer about their homeland, wherever that might be. I couldn't really fault their curiosity. Yet I was left with the unsettling, detached feeling of my skin being a coat I was just wearing for the time being. I put it on when I went out, but my real self was bundled up underneath. What they saw wasn't how I felt. They figured I was cold but I was quite warm inside.

I'm a stranger to what some claim is my homeland. And yet I come back to the States to discover American students complaining about how Asian-Americans should just go back to where they came from.

So I remain a foreigner in my own country. A foreigner wherever I go.

I've stopped trying to find any resemblances between my face and the people around me because there is none.

I looked out from the rooftop, my eyes drawn upward to the luminescent Acropolis resting majestically upon the rocky cliffs above Monastiraki. It's a shared history preserved. It's a reminder that their culture is rooted in something they don't have to apologetically explain. Sometimes I wish I had my own Acropolis.

Until then, I snuggle within my winter coat and forget I'm wearing it in the heat.