I lie on the airport floor in jeans, struggling to fall asleep. A metal button below my belt digs into my tailbone. I’m certainly tired, but my eyes refuse to remain shut.

“Hey, could I have some more nuts?”

I toss Neil the bag of almonds; we’re running dangerously low. I remain on the floor, staring awkwardly at the ceiling.

Some context: I am spending the fall of 2021 studying computer science in Budapest. The program includes a weeklong midterm break, which past students have used as a chance to travel across Europe. This year, however, the program’s organizers have imposed stringent anti-COVID guidelines, initially limiting international travel to Slovakia and Poland. Three days before midterm break, they unexpectedly loosened the restrictions. Students could now visit most of the continent.

I resolved with three friends – Tasfiq, Varun, and Neil – to visit Venice: suitably iconic, not too far away. We had little time for planning, especially given the deluge of exams we took during the week before break. Nevertheless, we arranged a very rough itinerary. Direct air tickets to Venice exceeded our budget this close to takeoff, so we instead booked flights to the Milan-Bergamo airport. We would try to catch some shuteye in the airport, then take an early morning train from Milan to Venice. There, we would live five days in a centrally located and reasonably priced hostel, riding gondolas and consuming unholy quantities of pasta.

Our plans began to derail immediately. We agreed to meet at Budapest’s Nyugati (Western) metro station, where we would board a train to the Liszt Ferenc International Airport on the city’s outskirts. Varun, Tasfiq and I arrived at about the same time. We tried and failed to
contact Neil, who had stopped answering texts and calls. Twenty minutes later, he arrived. His phone had mysteriously turned off, he explained. Try as he might, he could not revive it.

“Guys, this is a bad omen.”

The rest of us brushed off Neil’s fatalistic grumblings. Together at last, we hopped onto a train to the airport thirty seconds before it left the station.

We booked our plane tickets through Ryanair, a carrier popular with students in Europe. Since its 1984 founding, the ultra-low cost airline has amassed a reputation for poor customer service. In 2009, its CEO proposed charging flyers for using the in-flight toilets, but later admitted that doing so would present undesirable technical and legal difficulties. My friends and I only knew vaguely of Ryanair’s reputation. Before booking our tickets, we had asked a fellow student about his experience with the company.

He shrugged and said, “The plane got off the ground.”

When my friends and I arrived at the Budapesti airport, we suffered the consequences of our lack of research. The Ryanair mobile app would not permit us to check into our flights. It appeared the airline prohibited online check-in within two hours of departure. When we checked in at the airport in person, Ryanair charged us each a substantial processing fee. We felt, correctly, that we had been scammed.

Nevertheless, the plane indeed got off the ground. As that tiny hunk of plastic and steel rose off the runway, I fantasized about my upcoming week in Venice. I would participate in a host of vague but life-changing experiences: visiting museums, walking along canals, taking in the centuries-old architecture. Perhaps I would eat gelato. I had no room to move my feet, but my head was in the clouds.
Half an hour ago, we arrived at the Milan-Bergamo airport. A shuttle runs from the airport to the Milan train station once an hour throughout the night. We also realized upon landing that there were no restaurants open in or nearby the airport. I packed a bag of almonds and a loaf of bread, but these rations proved insufficient. Despite our hunger, we decided to give sleep a chance.

Right now, I am lying on the floor, using my duffle bag as a pillow. Soon, we give up on sleep and resolve to leave the airport in search of a restaurant. Using Google Maps, we find a McDonald’s near Milan’s train station; it will apparently remain open until three a.m. We decided that it would be a nice location to relax and eat a belated dinner.

We arrived at the McDonald’s around twelve-thirty. At the entrance, an employee wearing a suit and tie inspects our vaccination cards before allowing us in. This McDonald’s is more expensive than its American counterparts. Nevertheless, we happily order dinner. We find a booth on the restaurant’s lower level where we can charge our devices, and Neil’s phone miraculously turns on. We are all overjoyed. We even willingly pay extra for bathroom access. In a sense, the restaurant does what Ryanair never managed to: charge us for using the toilets.

The McDonald’s closes at one-thirty, an hour and a half earlier than we expected. The train station is closed, and all nearby hotels exceed our budget. We locate a reasonably comfortable bench next to an outdoor restaurant and sit awkwardly in the cold. Throughout the next three hours, every local I see is bizarrely well-dressed. Suits, ties and tailor-made dresses abound. Even my untrained eyes recognize a steady stream of designer brand logos. Milan, I remember – fashion capital of the world.
At four-thirty, we meander to the train station. I am exhausted, and I look forward to sleeping on the train to Venice. As we walk in, Tasfiq looks up at the timetable and says something that jolts me awake.

“What does ‘cancelado’ mean?”

The Italian Federation of Transport Workers schedules strikes months in advance, posting its plans online to avoid inconveniencing travelers. When my friends and I purchased our tickets to Venice, we did not know this information. Now, we find ourselves at five in the morning in a Milanese train station without tickets or a wink of sleep. Varun volunteers to visit customer service in an attempt to refund our bookings and acquire spots on the next train, scheduled to run at seven a.m. Neil, Tasfiq and I sit on an awkwardly slanted wooden bench in the middle of the station building. My jeans remain bulky and uncomfortable, but I cannot keep my eyes open. I begin to doze off, although I do not quite drift into sleep. Instead, I spend the next two hours in an agitated liminal state between sleep and wakefulness. I will later learn that my head during this time incessantly bobbed up and down like a drinky bird, as if each time I sank into sleep, the sudden action of my head falling would pull me back out.

Varun shakes me awake at six fifty-five.

“I got us our tickets — the train to Venice leaves in five minutes. We gotta go.”

I stand up and blink several times. Still in a daze, I try to sort out how Varun mustered the patience to interact with transportation bureaucracy in the middle of an all-nighter. Alongside Varun and Neil, I stumble my way away from the bench and toward the railway. From behind us, Tasfiq says something that jolts me awake:

“Guys, where’s my bag?”
Tasfiq’s bag, containing both his laptop and passport, has vanished. We spend the next 45 minutes scouring the train station before resigning to the fact that it was stolen. To re-enter Hungary, Tasfiq will need to apply for an emergency passport from a United States consulate in Italy. Most major cities in Italy have a U.S. consulate: Florence, Naples, Milan, but not Venice. Disappointed, we canceled our hostel bookings in Venice; Tasfiq will be unable to board a train without a proper passport. The United States consulate in Milan is closed today, so Tasfiq makes an appointment for tomorrow morning. In the meantime, we will need to find lodgings for the night. We leave the train station, blinded by the light of the sun.

An abbreviated recounting of the next eight hours: After much searching, we find a hostel with four open beds. It is wildly overpriced but lies near the consulate. Tasfiq no longer has valid identification; to book a room, he must receive paperwork from the local police station confirming that he lost his passport. Varun, Neil and I accompany him to the police station, but are not allowed to go inside with him. While we wait for him outside, a police officer scolds Neil for leaning against the police building. When we return to the hostel, we are permitted to rest on couches in the lobby while hostel workers prepare our lodgings. When we return to the hostel, we finally book rooms, and the four of us see beds for the first time in over 24 hours. I take off my jeans, lie down, and immediately fall asleep.

I wake up around four-thirty. Tasfiq remains sleeping in the bunk below me. Not wanting our excursion to Milan to be a complete waste of time and money, I decide to do some sight-seeing on my own. Our hostel lies about twenty minutes by foot from the Duomo di Milano.
Construction on the Duomo di Milano (Milan Cathedral) began in 1386. In its six-century-plus history, the building has generated diverse reactions. Some deride its aggressive flamboyance, its architectural in-your-face-ness. Others find it awe-inspiring. Henry James described the cathedral as an “immeasurable achievement... represent[ing] difficulties mastered, resources combined, labour, courage and patience.” I stop reading about the Duomo on Wikipedia and resolve to go see it for myself.

The sun has begun to set, and I zip my jacket as I step out of the hostel. On the walk to the cathedral, I pass by a sixteenth-century archway and also a Lego store. As I approach it, my eyes dart between the thickening crowd of tourists and the Google Maps app open on my phone. I round a corner, look up, and there it stands.

The Duomo is indeed massive. Pinnacles and spires and angelic figurines decorate brickwork arranged in a blunt, perpendicular mass. Tourists swarm around the building. Somewhere, officials sell tickets to go inside. It’s nice, I think while looking at it. A bit garish perhaps, but its historical significance makes up for it. I look around at my fellow tourists and I feel a certain connectedness, as if we are collectively forming a little corner of human history. How many sculptors have drawn inspiration from these intricately decorated outer walls? How many religious leaders have visited this site for worship? How many worldly travelers have stood where I stand, seen what I see?

I notice the Duomo’s north-facing wall is under renovation. Rendered in high resolution across the construction board, adorning a 600-year old place of worship, is an ad for Ralph Lauren.

I suddenly become viscerally, irrationally upset. The chaos of the past 24 hours comes into focus. I sink into the jostle of tourists, squished into a tiny seat on an ultra low-cost airline,
no room to move my feet. The McDonald’s, the train station, the hostel; the absurd, terrifying, hilariously self-serious outfits. It all smashes together into an enormous architectural feat, an immeasurable mass of labor, courage, patience, brutal, unending determination. A globalized European city, a twenty-first century economy drawing in tourists with Renaissance archways and time-battered fortresses and paintings you’ve seen on coffee mugs five thousand miles away, profits generated by locals working in conditions so oppressive they scheduled strikes months in advance…. My internal monologue begins to reproduce the language of a political science course.

My phone buzzes. My friends are deciding where to eat dinner. I hurry back to them.

We settle on La Luna, a pasteria twenty minutes northwest of our hostel, the only nearby restaurant with fewer than three dollar signs on Google Maps. The walk is unpleasant. The streets remain cold, and the mood recalls our brief flirtation with vagrancy.

Nevertheless, we trudge onwards. When we enter La Luna, our hoodies and jeans stand out against a mass of semi-formal attire. Alas, it is too late to leave; our bodies have grown accustomed to the warmth in the entryway. When the host seats us, she places me next to a framed poster from old Hollywood. The chairs are close together and I remember with agitation the flight to Bergamo. Nevertheless, it’s nice to sit down.

We order an assortment of dishes: pizza margherita, garganelli, risotto with shrimp. I deliver an earnest if incoherent speech comparing the Duomo di Milano to the Reagan administration, but the conversation drifts in other directions. We make fun of the playlist on loop on the restaurant’s sound system, jazz piano covers of bygone pop songs. Neil calls a bidet a
“toilet sink,” and we laugh. We take joy in eating a meal that comes from neither McDonald’s nor my backpack. For the first time since leaving Nyugati, we relax.

The bill is lower than we expected. On our way back to the hostel, we stopped for gelato, and I ate a scoop of ‘super dark’ from the cone. When we return to our lodgings, we congregate on Tasfiq’s bed as Neil mounts his computer on a bedside table. I look around at my friends and feel a certain connectedness.

Tomorrow morning, Tasfiq will wake up early and retrieve his emergency passport from the U.S. consulate. The four of us will purchase Ryanair flights back to Budapest for the same day. The shuttle back to the airport will be as crowded as a Black Friday sale, and we will barely make it on board without being trampled to death. We will arrive at the airport just in time for our flight, and we will fly out of Milan forever.

But tonight, we will watch cartoons and digest pasta and make ribald jokes that are all the funnier for their lack of originality. And I will fall asleep in jeans.