

Engines thunder to life on the tarmac of the Václav Havel airport in Prague, Czech Republic, marking the beginning of the long journey home. In about fifteen hours we will be amidst the untamed mountains and boundless forests surrounding my hometown. Located in the heart of the Tongass National Forest with a population of roughly 3,000, the close-knit fishing village of Petersburg, Alaska shapes every person who grows up within its embrace. In Petersburg, everyone takes care of one another. I remember when I was six, I crashed my bike in a strange neighborhood and a woman I had never seen before ran outside, cleaned up my cuts, and wiped away my tears. I still smile and say “hi” whenever we pass on the street. Growing up here, where muskeg holes are hot tubs for the brave and catching fresh herring to sell to tourists is a payday, offers unlimited potential for adventure. For all its appeal, though, there are times I feel utterly out of place since my family is continents away.

My mother grew up in Czechoslovakia during communism, and shortly after the Velvet Revolution she decided to leave and move to the United States. She describes the day she first came to Petersburg as “nezapomenutelný” — “never to be forgotten.” It was in this far-off corner of the world that she met my father and made Petersburg her home. Dad always threw himself into everything with passion. When I was eight he bought me my first recurve bow and we’d spend hours together practicing in the backyard. He would grab me from my mother’s watch for impromptu ice cream runs, and play baseball with me in the front yard until we were both exhausted. Dad used to tell me that I could be anything I wanted, climb the highest mountains, and dream the impossible. Like any little girl, I relished my dad’s words with all of my heart.

Little things remind me of the day I lost him, and these moments unsettle me like a jolt of turbulence. The heartache we felt after he died makes memories somewhat blurry, but I distinctly recall my mother’s unwavering strength. I remember nights studying at the kitchen table holding up flashcards like, “How many U.S Representatives are there?” so that she would pass the naturalization test to become a U.S citizen. She did all of this for me, so I could stay in Alaska and finish school somewhere familiar. Without Dad, Mom had nobody to support her or help pay for school activity fees and new ballet shoes. Having no family nearby took its toll, and Mom and I found ourselves constantly saving money for plane tickets, our trips to the Czech Republic becoming more frequent. As I grew older and learned Czech, I felt the healing that comes with being surrounded by family. Soon I began to see traveling to the Czech Republic as coming back to something instead of leaving something behind. I was captivated by the beauty of Prague Castle at dusk and the ancient cobblestone streets beneath my feet, but also by the people, the culture, and the new perspective I gained from my experiences. Here, I could spend time with my grandmother, who always tells me “najít štěstí v nejtežší momentu,” which means, roughly, “find the light in the darkest moments.”

A day or so later, after changing planes in Heathrow and Seattle, the jet circles and descends into Petersburg. Everything looks exactly the same: the towering mountains, white-capped waves, and blue roofed houses. But every time I return, something inside me changes and I see my home with new eyes. I realize I am divided by two backgrounds, but made whole by the love of two people. It is in these moments that I know my home is not only in Petersburg or Prague, home is in the journey as well.