

She Gets to Go

“She gets to go? She doesn’t deserve it. She doesn’t even know what it means to go abroad. Not really; not like me or my friends. She won’t appreciate it; she’s going to complain. Look, she’s whining about it already, and you only told her about it ten seconds ago. You really want to bring that with you on an eight-hour plane ride? You really think she’s going to know what she’s seeing on the other side?”

The house shook when I went back upstairs to my bedroom in order to hide from the cries of my sister. I knew I’d been mean, but I didn’t feel bad about it. I was angry. Nora and Teeny were just as much her cousins as mine, but Bev didn’t care about anything but playing with toy horses and eating ice cream, and she could do that in our Midwestern backyard. She didn’t need to go to Spain to goof around with plastic and junk food.

My middle school only offered three languages. I was taking beginner’s French, and I was suddenly sorry I hadn’t elected to take Spanish instead. But who could have known at the start of the year that my Aunt would get a job working overseas and take my cousins with her, or that my parents would decide my mom and sister and I should visit? I’d seen pictures of the house they lived in, and it was huge and on a hill that overlooked the city and had a spiral staircase in it. I was jealous. Our house was small and had a regular staircase, and the only hill around was a short one we used for sledding, and it didn’t have any views of Barcelona.

As much as I envied them, though, I told myself I didn’t want to be them. Nora and Teeny were as spoiled as they came, and they didn’t seem to treasure anything. They liked shopping and when I talked to them on the phone after I found out we were going to visit, that’s all they gabbed about. Didn’t they realize they were in another country? Didn’t they know they could shop for clothes anywhere? Nora was my age and spoke excitedly about this store and that, and suggested we sneak out one night and go dancing at a club that her high-school boyfriend had taken her to. I didn’t have a high-school boyfriend, or a middle-school boyfriend but told myself it was okay because at least I could spell, and I knew how to use commas correctly. I’d read some of Nora’s school papers, and they were awful.

I knew what mattered.

It wasn’t shopping.

Especially not in Barcelona.

We had to drive to a passport agency to get our passports quickly, since the trip was coming up faster than we thought, and it would take too long to get our documents by mail.

“If this car ride is anything like the plane ride is going to be,” I said, “then you should change your mind fast.”

Bev was whining in the back seat about the drive being too long, the bumps in the road being too high, and the sun through the window being too bright. When we got to the agency, the lines were long and Bev wiggled and whined about her feet hurting and her stomach rumbling. I stood quietly, took my passport photo with a serious smile, and told my sister to shut up as we clambered back into the car to head home. I knew what mattered. A long drive was worth it.

We were going to be traveling over the American holiday, Thanksgiving, and I wished more than anything that I could be thankful for the company of my best friend on this trip instead of that of my sister.

“Miriam would appreciate this way more than Bev does, Mom,” I argued. “Bev doesn’t even want to go.” I was standing in the kitchen a few weeks out from the trip, making a case for changing my sister’s ticket to my friend’s name. “She’s taking Spanish, too, so she’d be really helpful when we go exploring around the city.” Mom said no, but at least she was nice about it. I apologized to Miriam a couple times about her not being able to join us. “Maybe next time. You should get a passport just in case we go there again.”

One week before the trip, I started to set things aside to pack. There was a ledge underneath the windows in my room, and I’d pushed all of my books and my rock and coin collections out of the way to make room for the things I’d need in Spain. I had my sneakers and one pair of nice shoes, a pair of jeans, a skirt, and a few T-shirts, a tank top and a sweater. I also had some empty journals because I’d need to write down my travel thoughts. I’d need to have them for later, when I’d be writing stories, and would need characters and scenes and events to draw from. I did not bring anything too fancy. I didn’t want to go to Nora’s high-school boyfriend’s dance club. I knew what mattered.

It wasn’t dance clubs.

The plane ride was long and actually three plane rides. We had to fly to New York first to catch a flight to London, and then we'd wait for some hours before a plane departed for Barcelona. The flight to New York was bumpy, and I cried quietly in my seat. What if we crashed? What if I died at age 14, not an author, without having seen Europe, having never been kissed? It upset me. Romance, art and travel were the most important things. My sister cried. She didn't want to crash, she said, because then she wouldn't be able to see her pet hamster again. What do you expect from a 4th grader, I thought, and pinched her and told her it was going to be okay. I knew what mattered, and it wasn't hamsters.

We landed just fine in London, and my mom took our hands as we walked through the airport. Everyone spoke like a fairytale sounds in your head. We found some couches and a food court. Bev ate a Toblerone and I ate a Twix, and after we'd wiped the chocolate from our hands, we both fell asleep while my mom read a magazine. She woke us up when we had to hurry to the gate for the last leg of the trip. Butterflies in my stomach wouldn't calm down, and I was sorry I'd eaten the Twix bar.

When we got to the house in Barcelona, I was tired. Nora and Teeny were watching TV, and they didn't run to meet us at the door. I gave them both half-hearted hugs and went to my guest room to nap. The window had iron bars on it. I felt like I was in a movie. When I woke up, it was three hours later, and Nora asked if I wanted to go explore.

"Of course!" I put on sneakers, and Nora put on sandals, and even though it was November, she didn't wear a coat; instead, she had on a high-necked sweater and a fitted black jacket like an office worker wears. She looked pretty in her makeup, and I felt shabby without mine, so I put on some colored lip gloss—it was all I owned. I thought about my sporty coat and how it didn't really match with the situation. "I need something better, something more sleek," I said out loud. Nora grabbed a leather jacket from her closet.

"I don't really wear this anymore," she told me, and I put it on. It fit. I looked really different in it, and I liked it. I felt important.

We took a bus to the city and walked a lot. Nora showed me sculptures and pointed out her school. She mentioned, but did not drag me to, her favorite clothing store. Instead, we went inside a market where hundreds of people speaking Spanish hustled from stall to stall,

buying bread and cheese and rabbit, and when we left, gnawing hard rolls, she pointed out a stall that sold horse meat.

Gross, I thought, and cool.

Nora took me to the ocean before we had to go back home. The wind made it colder than the rest of the city, but we threw our shoes behind us and sprinted for the water. I'm in the Mediterranean! I thought very loudly in my head. Before our toes turned blue, we left and I filled an empty Fanta bottle with water from the sea. I'd give it to Miriam. Here, I'd say, I got you the Mediterranean as a souvenir. I knew what mattered. Miriam would love it.

The next day was Thanksgiving, although no one in Barcelona cared except for us. My mom and my aunt spent the day in the giant kitchen, cooking turkey and potatoes for an expatriate holiday with my aunt's housekeeper, who didn't speak English. Some people were coming over for dinner that night—other Americans away from home for the holiday. Nothing in the city was closed, so Nora, my uncle and I went exploring again. I saw more artwork and some street graffiti, and we ate a small lunch at a café. I was in Spain on Thanksgiving! This was a situation that seemed to happen only in books. I wrote it down, so I could put it into one of mine.

That night, I fussed upstairs; disappointed in everything I'd packed for the trip. Bev marched out of the bedroom she was sharing with Teeny, wearing a jumper with a long-sleeved shirt underneath it. She had these crazy blonde curls that puffed out of her head like a clown wig, but it looked good, and I was jealous. My hair was plain brown and didn't know whether it was curly or straight. Nora watched me try on my skirt and saw me throw it off in frustration. She gave me one of hers which was a lot shorter than anything I owned.

"It looks great on you!" she said, and then told me to hurry up because everyone was there, and dinner was ready and holy cow, was she hungry!

The dining room table was beautiful. Eight other people had joined us, and candles lit their faces in the dim room and made them all look like good friends. Two older couples, a single older gentleman, and a mother and father with their teenaged son were there. We stood around the table and held hands, said grace, and dug in. All the adults were here because of work, and the teenaged son was going to a school for American kids abroad. I felt butterflies in my stomach when he talked. I wanted to go to school abroad. My cousins got to,

and they didn't seem to care how amazing it was. Nora talked about taking me shopping the next day. You look so good in my clothes, she said, so cute. We need to get you some of your own.

Dinner wrapped up. Teeny and Bev brought pies from the kitchen. Nora and I got to sample some wine. The adults made coffee, and even the teenaged boy drank some. I asked for a cup but could only drink from it a few times, and I had to eat a bite of pie between each sip. My stomach was still full of butterflies. I thought about how wonderful it would be to grow up and travel for a living. I thought of how Bev would never want to do that, since she liked being comfortable too much. I thought about how when I grew up and made my life abroad, I wouldn't spend so much time in dance clubs or trying on cute clothes.

I knew what mattered. I did like the clothes, though.

The adults began to leave. One couple bid us goodnight, then the other. The single gentleman actually tipped his hat as he stood in the doorway, and my aunt shook his hand. My mom and Teeny and Bev had begun to clear some dishes, and Nora and I blew out candles. The mother and father and their teenaged son folded their napkins on the table and began to leave as well.

I guess it's European, to kiss your hosts on the cheek goodbye. My aunt did so, and so did Nora; I did, too, when it was my turn at the door. Goodbye to the father, goodbye to the mother, and then the son put his face against mine. I kissed each cheek as he did mine, I think, but I know I floundered a little bit, because I wasn't expecting it. No one in America said goodbye like that—especially not teenagers. It was novel when these parents did it, but it was very different to me when this boy did it, even though it wasn't, and he was just saying goodnight like the rest of them. Nora made fun of me upstairs.

I'd spent the night listening to travel stories and noticing, over pumpkin pie, the little indications that I was in another country. That's what that was, I said to myself. In French class, I'd learned that kissing on the cheek was a common European way of greeting people. I had just experienced culture first hand. I'd felt my cheeks flush, but it was only from the adventure, from the culture. I knew what mattered. That's all that it was.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. With whom does the narrator, or the person telling the story, travel to Barcelona?

- A She travels with her best friend, Miriam.
- B She travels with her sister and her mom.
- C She travels with her cousins.
- D She travels by herself.

2. How does the narrator feel about traveling?

- A She is eager to go shopping in another country.
- B She is afraid and does not want to leave home.
- C She is excited to experience a new culture.
- D She is sad that she will not get to see her family.

3. Read the following sentences: "As much as I envied them, though, I told myself I didn't want to be them. Nora and Teeny were as spoiled as they came, and they didn't seem to treasure anything. They liked shopping and when I talked to them on the phone after I found out we were going to visit, that's all they gabbed about. Didn't they realize they were in another country? Didn't they know they could shop for clothes anywhere?"

Based on this information, why does the narrator not want to be like Nora and Teeny?

- A They didn't value the experience of living in another country.
- B They bragged about living in another country too much.
- C They don't like the narrator.
- D They valued experiences more than they did material things.

4. Based on the story, what matters to the narrator?

- A hanging out with her cousins
- B wearing nice clothes
- C going to dance clubs
- D experiencing different cultures

5. What is the story mainly about?

- A The narrator learns to appreciate her family even when they fight.
- B The narrator finds the importance of experiencing new cultures through travel.
- C The narrator learns to love fashion and shopping.
- D The narrator finds European culture to be disappointing.

6. Read the following sentence: "I'd spent the night listening to travel stories and noticing, over pumpkin pie, the little **indications** that I was in another country."

As used in the passage, what does the word "**indications**" mean?

- A benefits
- B words
- C disadvantages
- D signals

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Nora and Teeny love to shop, _____ the narrator does not think that shopping matters.

- A but
- B before
- C moreover
- D so

8. What did the narrator and Nora do when they explored Barcelona?

9. When someone lives or visits another country, do they give up all the traditions of home? Use evidence from the story to support your answer.

10. What does the narrator discover was important about traveling to another country? Use information from the passage to support your answer.

Teacher Guide & Answers**Passage Reading Level:** Lexile 850

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8. What did the narrator and Nora do when they explored Barcelona?

Suggested answer: The two girls walk around the city, look at sculptures, see the cousin's school, visit a bustling food market, and walk along the beach of the Mediterranean Sea.

9. When someone lives or visits another country, do they give up all the traditions of home? Use evidence from the story to support your answer.

Suggested answer: People who visit or travel abroad can also keep their customs. When the narrator and her sister and mother are in Spain for Thanksgiving, they have a traditional holiday dinner, including pumpkin pie.

10. What does the narrator discover was important about traveling to another country? Use information from the passage to support your answer.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary and should be supported by the passage. Students may explain that the narrator learns that visiting another country is an exciting opportunity to see new places, have new experiences, and observe new customs, like dipping her feet in the Mediterranean Sea when it is cold, seeing horse meat being sold in a food market, and kissing guests goodbye on the cheeks. But she also sees that it is okay to enjoy ordinary experiences, like wearing pretty clothes and eating Thanksgiving pie.