

Terra Firma
Halle Beshouri '20

The AC is on full blast, but I've already sweat straight through my t-shirt. Peeling my bare thighs off the leather seat, I lean tentatively towards the window, hoping to catch yet another shot of the Adriatic Sea. Instead, I jerk back as another car comes whirring past.

"Watch the road!" I scold my father, catching his eyeroll in the rearview mirror.

"You and your mother are something else," he complains with a laugh. "You plan these trips, get all excited, and then spend half the time like this!" He nods at my mom, whose own eyes are clamped shut. "You better take plenty of pictures, because your mom won't remember any of it." At that, Mom lifts an eyelid just enough to glare at him.

I can't say I blame her. The sliver of coastline that belongs to Slovenia, while stunning, is *steep*. The narrow road down to Piran winds around small villages carved into the cliffside, and the locals couldn't care less about the speed limit. As my camera homes in on red-roofed buildings painted in pastel hues, matchbox cars zoom through the frame like bullets, blurring the shot and fraying my nerves.

We swing around another hairpin turn and Piran finally appears before us, the sandy peninsula jutting into turquoise waters. The town is smaller than I expected—just a few hundred homes clustered along the beach—but even from here I can see its central clocktower standing proudly over it all, just as it has for centuries. A photographer's dream.

The last few minutes down to sea level pass mercifully without incident. The heart of Piran is a wide open square, its gray flagstones dotted with market stalls beneath colorful awnings designed to attract foot traffic from the marina. Gulls squawk overhead, competing with the tinkling laughter of small children intent on toddling towards the gently bobbing sailboats just visible between buildings.

It's a charming scene, but not my destination. I'm aiming for that clocktower—the views from the top are said to be some of the best in the country. Tangled back alleys twist through town, the shade offering us a welcome reprieve from the heat.

The tower stretches some eight stories high, looming over Piran with a majesty that only comes with age and history. I capture several shots of pale brick against deep blue sky, flicking through each picture in turn to appraise its quality. Satisfied, I ask if my parents are ready to climb up.

"Oh, we're not going with you." My head snaps up. My mom holds my gaze. "There's no way I'm going all the way up there." Her fear of heights is famous within our extended family, but I'd assumed her love for travel would come first here. I turn beseechingly to my dad.

"Sorry, kid, I'm staying down here with your mom. My knees can't handle that," he nods towards the tower, "but you can go by yourself."

"But I don't *want* to go by myself," I whine. "I thought we were all going up together!"

"It's your choice, bud. We'll be over there." Without waiting for my reply, my parents stroll in the direction of the seawall.

Crap. I'd come all this way to see the tower, sure, but my own fear of heights is not insignificant, and I've always believed firmly in the principle of safety in numbers. But I'd dreamed of this picture—turning back now *can't* be an option. Cursing my conflicting desires, the stubborn tourist in me overrides the cautious pessimist.

I push open the heavy metal door, my eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness. A cool, musty smell swirls among the dust motes, which promptly disappear from view the moment the

door clangs shut behind me. What little light there is drifts in from narrow windows high above, revealing chipped concrete walls and a staircase circling out of sight. The lack of information for travelers leaves me somewhat apprehensive, but I know I'm in the right place. One last look at the door and I begin to climb.

I trip almost immediately. Each step is unique, made of slabs of wood that differ in both thickness and levelness. The standard eight-inch rise between steps that I'm used to is nowhere to be found, swapped here for a willy-nilly placement of treads that are sometimes too close, sometimes too far. There's no riser, either, no backing to stop my sneakers from sliding straight through the gaping holes between each step. I watch my feet carefully, not daring to lift my gaze to see how far I've come. I begin to count the steps, a nervous habit I picked up as a child and never really dropped. Today, it's a welcome distraction from the boiling fear of heights that wants to send me back down to my parents, right alongside my sinking stomach.

I climb and climb, becoming increasingly dizzy as the stairs spiral ever upwards. By step 37, my calves begin to burn, a slow tingle that I know will soon haunt me. On step 68, I risk a glance out the nearest window, cringing at the small specks that are my parents far below. By step 92, I am officially out of breath, not helped by an involuntary gasp as my foot slips on the next tread. Between steps 108 and 109, a young couple heading down squeezes past me. I'm relieved at this first sign of human existence, but cling to the wall all the same.

At step 147, I pause. The stairs have ended, but I'm not at the top. No, instead there's a ladder rising up to what must be the landing. Made of the same rough timber as the stairs, each rung is a good two feet from the one above. My short legs are *not* built for this—but standing in the near dark on this creaky platform is even more unappealing. Wiping my hands on my shorts, I tentatively take one step, and then another. The top few rungs are obscured by heavy plastic flaps designed to keep out rain, and as I push through them I nearly fall off the ladder in the sudden rush to cover my ears. I hadn't checked the time before starting my climb, so it hadn't occur to me that the clocktower would soon ring out the hour to the entire peninsula. Now standing approximately six feet from the tolling bell, I wonder if I've just ruptured an eardrum.

My hands remain clamped over my ears until I'm certain that the bell's roar has ceased, and only then do I finally venture out onto the viewpoint. The monstrous golden bell at the center takes up most of this space, encircled by a narrow balcony that can barely hold the handful of other tourists. The protective netting extending up from the railing appears to be the only update the tower has seen since 1609. This safety measure does little to assuage my fears, and as my anxious breaths become increasingly shallow, I'm careful to look out, rather than down. They say that helps with heights.

But—there's my shot. The town square glows, shimmering in pale pinks and yellows, and the marina's bright white sails glitter in the late afternoon sun. Early diners have settled at small trattorias, the faintest wisps of cheerful music riding the sea breeze. The smell of seafood intermingles with salty air that feels heavy on my warm shoulders. From this height, I can see straight out to the Adriatic, my eyes searching for some hint of Italy on the horizon. For a moment, I forget the elevation, the rickety stairs, the ringing in my ears. Instead, I focus on Piran, trying to envision the town three or four hundred years ago. Something tells me it looked much the same. My camera clicks away, desperately trying to capture Slovenian magic.

My return trek, back down all those slipshod steps, lingers somewhere in my near future, this time complete with a full view of just how high up I am. I risk a glance at that unsteady ladder, descending into the dark abyss, before snapping my gaze back to the horizon. Somehow, the vista in front of me makes that fear just a little less overwhelming. I've gotten myself up

here, and—eventually—I’m going to get myself back down. Except, maybe without actually looking down.

~