

**FIRST PLACE, ESSAY**  
**Study Abroad Storytelling Contest 2025**

“Meows and Midnight Talks”  
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## “Meows and Midnight Talks”

Starting college is daunting enough, but beginning my first semester in a foreign country, far from everything familiar, felt like diving headfirst into the deep end of change. My first few weeks in Athens, Greece were marked by anxious phone calls to advisors and back-to-back appointments, as the stress took a physical toll. I often broke down behind the closed door of the shared bathroom- used by eight girls, but somehow my private refuge in moments of overwhelm. Yet even in the midst of that emotional chaos, I was incredibly lucky. I found a circle of reliable, trustworthy friends who stood by me through the worst days and the best. Strangely enough, many of those meaningful bonds began to take shape through a shared love of something simple and pure: cats.

We'd heard that Greece was home to plenty of friendly stray cats, but from our earliest World Scholar excursions, we had a sneaking suspicion that one particular feline had made a home at the bottom of R1 (Residential Building 1). That's how the nightly “Cookie runs” began. Soon, they became a daily tradition. Between the big, comfy couches, Cookie's oversized teddy bear, and the cozy atmosphere, I found myself eagerly anticipating the end of each day- those quiet moments spent unwinding with friends, petting the sweet resident kitty. What started as a simple, almost silly routine became something deeply meaningful. It brought me closer to my future best friends, helped me cross cultural and ethnic boundaries, and introduced me to music and interests unique to the region where I was studying abroad.

At the time, I lived just across the street from Cookie's home, so my friend who lived in R1 with her quickly became my lifeline. He endured countless texts from me- *“Is Cookie home?”*-and always kept me updated. Being a huge cat person, I even used my extra

supermarket vouchers to buy food for the stray cats, though Cookie got the lion's share of my attention. At one point, I started sneaking her leftover fish from the dining hall (questionable cat nutrition, I know- but she seemed to love it and turned out just fine). This love for Cookie became more than a quirky habit; it brought me closer to my roommates and other World Scholars. Our Cookie runs stretched late into the night, filled with laughter and conversation, bonding us over a tiny cat with a big presence.

The dorm lounge, right at the entrance of R1, became our unofficial social hub. We'd spend hours there during Cookie runs, chatting, laughing, and lounging on the couches. Because it was such a central spot, people were constantly passing by, opening the door to unexpected friendships with others who also stopped to greet the beloved stray. One of the friendships I formed didn't begin so smoothly- it started with tension.

A big part of my identity is being a dual citizen: Croatian and American. My parents immigrated from former Yugoslavia during the war, and since we're the only ones abroad, we often return to Croatia to visit family. Studying abroad in Athens was especially exciting because I saw it as a chance to connect more deeply with my Balkan roots- this time, through the lens of a college student. I even packed two Croatian soccer jerseys, imagining they'd spark camaraderie with others from the region. Greece, after all, felt like neutral ground.

But to my surprise, those jerseys had the opposite effect. Instead of creating connection, they became a point of division- especially with the large Serbian community on campus. Even though we spoke the same language, and despite my mom being from Belgrade, they picked up on the Croatian in my accent and used it to distance themselves. The tension escalated into open hostility, and I suddenly felt alienated in a space I'd hoped would bring me closer to home.

Andjela, along with a few other Serbian students, lived in that building and would often give me sharp side-eyes as they passed through the lounge. There was this quiet tension, like an invisible wall between us. But one evening, just as my roommates and I were getting ready to head back upstairs, I saw Andjela sitting on the couch, chatting on the phone with her mom. For some reason, I decided to push through the discomfort and talk to her. It felt silly that there was so much animosity between us- we shared the same culture, the same language, and yet we'd never even exchanged a proper hello.

To my surprise, the conversation went incredibly well. We clicked instantly. From that day on, we became close friends. We started meeting in the dining hall, going to basketball games, hanging out with her Serbian friends, talking in our shared mother tongue. For the first time, I had a friend group that could actually pronounce my last name- and more importantly, one where I could be unapologetically Balkan.

Having both an American friend group and a former Yugoslav one was incredibly fulfilling. It made me feel like I could fully embrace both parts of my identity without choosing one over the other. And the funny part is, if I hadn't been loitering in that downstairs lounge- if it weren't for Cookie and our little nightly tradition- I might never have spoken to Andjela, and we might never have formed the meaningful bond we share today.

Spending time in the R1 lobby and leading our nightly Cookie runs gave me more than just a reason to leave my dorm room, it gave me unforgettable experiences and meaningful connections I never expected. Beyond the friendships I formed, I gained a deeper understanding of my host country's culture. The RAs on duty downstairs often played Greek music or streamed local broadcasts, sparking conversations and introducing songs that made their way onto my

playlists. In the end, it wasn't the landmarks or lectures that defined my time abroad; it was the laughter, late nights, and one unforgettable cat.