After this photo was taken, Arija’s team competed in the Peace Canoe race, in which she led her team to the fastest time of both male and female campers.
IF MY FAMILY SAYS “GO LEFT,” I USUALLY GO RIGHT. IT’S HOW I’M BUILT. IT REFLECTS MY DESIRE FOR INDEPENDENCE—SOME HAVE CALLED IT STUBBORNNESS—AND IT ALMOST KEPT ME FROM HAVING THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE OF MY LIFE.

My grandmother has always been a role model to me. She overcame poverty, dyslexia, and underestimation of her abilities to serve in the Maine Senate and fight for what she cared about. She is passionate about the things she supports. This includes the Seeds of Peace International Camp, a summer program in rural Maine that allows hundreds of young people from conflict-ridden regions of the world to meet their supposed enemies face to face.

As I was growing up, my grandmother, who had helped form Seeds of Peace many years ago, would subtly mention “Seeds” in my presence, glancing over to see my reaction. As I grew older, no matter how far my interests wandered into the realm of politics and culture, I refused to submit. But as I listened to my grandmother and read articles about this camp where Israelis break bread with Palestinians and Pakistanis bunk with Indians, the ideals of Seeds of Peace must have lodged deeply within me. I made the decision to apply and experience my grandmother’s legacy for myself.

On (Not) Belonging
When I am asked where I’m from, I usually say Darien, a small homogenous town tucked into the fold of Connecticut and New York. It is where I live. But in a country like the United States, the origin question is unavoidable: “No, but where are you from?” In America, you are never truly American; your roots are always elsewhere.

Though I live in Darien, I attend a very diverse public high school in the neighboring town of Norwalk. The Center for Global Studies (CGS), a magnet school, is a hub of international education where students learn Mandarin, Japanese, or Arabic language and immerse themselves in the related cultures. CGS is located within a large urban high school that is itself a hotbed of cultural expression, harboring students from areas as diverse as the wealthy seaside houses of Rowayton and the working-class neighborhoods of inner-city Norwalk. At CGS, I am constantly asked where I’m from, not to assess my belonging, but to understand my background: What do I eat at home? What language do my parents speak? How close is my family?

Given my lack of knowledge of my genealogy, I often opt for a joke in response to questions of my heritage: “Well, my mother’s family is Jewish, so they’re probably from Eastern Europe somewhere.”

A heavy pause. “They moved around a lot,” I say. “No one liked the Jews.” And then I smile, so they know I’m kidding.

In the Color Games competition, the camp is evenly divided into two teams for two and a half days of intense competition.

Charting Unknown Territory
At Seeds of Peace, they did not know I was kidding. The first few days, we traveled in packs with members of our own delegation, speaking our common language, building a defense. The Americans trailed behind, trying to assimilate into seven cultures at the same time, feeling like we had nothing to offer because we weren’t directly involved in conflict regions. Even my monolingualism made me feel inferior.

The first week involved sprinting between an Afghan and an Egyptian across a soccer (sorry, make that “football”) field to the shower house in darkness; reaching across Palestinian and Jewish Israeli arms for Nutella at the dinner table; and bypassing Indian Hindus and Pakistani Muslims to pass a field hockey ball to a Palestinian. But at Seeds, something changes in the first week. It happens so slowly that you don’t notice the magic taking place. Suddenly, you’ve attached names to the nationalities. You’re sprinting between Heels and Farah, reaching toward Aryan, and passing the ball to Ali. Without realizing it, you have become a part of a community. To some, that’s breathtaking; to others, terrifying; to all of us, it was unknown territory.
nothing in common with. One day my South Asian dialogue group assembled for an afternoon art class. The instructors, college-aged men and women with expertise or interest in geopolitical problem solving, told us to pair up and talk for a few minutes about what home meant to us, then to create our partner's home using any medium we chose. I was paired with Hasti, a petite Afghan girl wearing a beautiful jade hijab. When I asked about her home city of Kabul, I expected to hear what I thought I knew: the bombings, the persecution, the zealots. Instead she told me about the Kabul she knew, chiseled into the mountainside, lush with wildlife and colorful with people. She told me about her little window with its view of the city lit up at night and about the pencil and pad she used to capture it.

Emotions Run High
I do not cry at sad movies. I sat through Marley and Me without shedding a tear. I tell you this because it is important to understand the significance of the time I cried at camp.

About halfway through my three-and-a-half week session, the headlines pouring in from events in Gaza threatened to bury the camp alive. The death toll hung heavily on everyone, but especially on the Palestinian Seeds. I can't imagine
begin to imagine the anguish they must have been feeling. In what to many was a highly controversial act, members of the Palestinian delegation planned a memorial service (or protest, depending on one’s perspective) to commemorate the Seeds from Gaza who had been unable to attend camp this year. Many Palestinians and some Egyptians exempted themselves from regular camp activities, wore their Palestinian shirts, and sat in a circle on the field.

This act inflamed the camp and everybody was distraught, for different reasons. Split by delegation, Seeds were shouting at each other in the road under the hot summer sun. I remember being surrounded by teens and angrily yelling at a Palestinian boy, “What were you thinking?” My pitch was growing higher by the second, and I choked down a sob. “How could you do this here, to us?” I was hurt that a member of my “family” had purposely torn down the trust and respect we had all worked so hard to build. He calmly explained that it wasn’t meant to be a protest; it was intended to be a time to share the stories of the Seeds who couldn’t be there with us. They had never meant to make people angry. I disagreed: the act itself was meant to be public, and I told him so. Loudly. Everybody around us was arguing; some were talking calmly, while others screamed and cried. “It wasn’t for everyone,’ he replied. “It was just for us, to mourn our losses.”

“Your losses? Your losses? They aren’t your lives!” I was truly sobbing now, tears falling hot on my cheeks and sliding down the collar of my shirt. “You can’t claim them, count them. They don’t belong to you. Don’t you see how stupid this is? You take your lives, and they’ll take theirs, and you can count them up but it never ends.” That’s when my bawling overwhelmed my words, and I broke down in the middle of the street. The Palestinian boy crouched down, pulled me into his chest, and held me close until I could breathe again.

It is tough to articulate the impact that Seeds had on me, or to explain how painful it was to say goodbye to a family I had learned to love. Even though I’m in contact with my international friends, I can’t help but feel isolated in my hometown because my perspective has been so fundamentally altered. I am still scared of the true goodness I saw in people at camp, because I learned that we have the potential for peace. That has taught me that what is holding us back is not the impossibility of reconciliation, but rather a lack of action, a lack of conversation. Before camp, I dismissed humanity easily, cynically. Now I cannot ignore the potential people have to be good—any more than I can ignore the responsibility I have to bring about change.

Arija Forsyth is a sophomore at The Center for Global Studies at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk, CT, where she studies Mandarin Chinese, plays varsity field hockey, and participates in Model UN, debate, and Key Club. Her interests include backpacking, reading, and passionate discussion, and her favorite authors include John Steinbeck, Kurt Vonnegut, and Shakespeare.