Chapter 1

I graduated from college in 2018 with a plan. I had excelled at Stony Brook University studying journalism and I was confident I’d have an engaging and challenging job secured in no time. After all, I already had secured a competitive internship for the summer and would have plenty of time to land my first full-time position.

I wasn’t worried.

A few days after that photo above was taken, I moved to State College, PA to start working at AccuWeather as a video producer. It took a few weeks to settle, but I was soon applying to every position that caught my eye. The weeks started to roll by, and I barely got any call backs. By the end of July, I was no closer to a job than when I first moved and stuck with the question: what am I going to do next?

I recall talking with my brother and he suggested going on some kind of a trip. At first, I rejected the idea: “Go where?” I thought. But then it started to grow on me. I also had and extra $2,000 from a scholarship I had won in my last semester of college. Typically, these awards just deduct from your overall university balance, but since I had graduated, it became mine to do with what I wanted.

I strung together a list of cities, found places to stay (either AirBnB or with friends) and everything seemed possible and within budget. I said, “Why not? When is the next time I’ll be able to spend a few months just driving around the country?”

Chapter 2

What better place to start a trip than New York City right? I was familiar with the city, having gone in occasionally while I was just a few hours away on Long Island. This time, I chose to stay on the far Upper West Side (we’re talking streets in the 150s/160s). This was my first time really seeing Hamilton and Washington Heights and they remain as some of my favorite places in the city. Of course, I bounced around a lot… down to Brooklyn and then to Battery Park to visit with a friend from college.

After three days, I was ready to get going to my next stop. New York is nice to visit but I could never live there. It takes far too long to get anywhere in that massive city. I don’t know about you, but I’m not really up for spending an hour each way just to get between boroughs. And don’t even get me started on the traffic….

Chapter 3

Ah yes. Philadelphia. The city of cream cheese… I mean brotherly love.

I didn’t quite know what to expect when I first arrived here (the incredibly narrow streets were certainly a shock) There’s something about this city that’s just captivating. Maybe I have a soft spot since it’s kind of a sister city to St. Louis. I appreciate their similar sense of city pride.

There’s a way people carry themselves here on the streets, in the parks, in restaurants and bars that exudes this quiet confidence. It’s almost like they’re saying, “We know Philly isn’t New York. And it isn’t meant to be.”

If you forced me to live in one Northeastern city, I’d choose Philadelphia. You have good food, good sports… and you’re a quick train ride away from New York or DC the political and financial hubs of the country.

Chapter 4

Up next: Baltimore and the nation’s capital!

These were pretty quick stops, only a couple of nights each and I didn’t really get that much time to explore or get a deep feel for either city, especially Baltimore. I had a friend from high school living there who I met up with, and we walked around a little through the neighborhood and park where he lived but I just didn’t know what, if anything I wanted to see.

Baltimore is strange to me. I know it’s a rich and vibrant place, but the way it that other nearby cities passed it by leaves a lot of that richness undiscovered. I knew I wouldn’t hit on it in just a few days.

D.C. on the other hand is much easier to do in a limited timeframe. I remember my main goal was to get good Ethiopian food because I remember a fantastic restaurant from when I visited in 5th grade. Other stops included the Newseum (where the photo above is taken actually) and visiting with more friends.

But I left a few days later wanting more. I was searching for the same feeling I had in Philadelphia, but neither of these places captured my mind and heart in the same way.

Chapter 5

I was done with the short drives of this journey and into the long-haul section. For those who haven’t driven it, Washington D.C. to Atlanta is long. But it’s also gorgeous. Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia have such beautiful foliage and when I was driving in early September the trees were as green as ever.

I was excited when I arrived in Atlanta. It was one of the cities on my list that I really wanted to move to after graduating. Things felt right. I even had an interview for a job at one of the public radio stations during my stay! (I wasn’t hired).

The style of the city drew me in, especially the art. It captured a similar swagger to what I’d already seen in the Northeast, but gone was the hard aggressiveness I had come to expect from living in New York. It felt like there was room for everyone to be who they were and I loved it. It was really the first time I was in a place where I felt like I was defined by my character instead of accomplishments or a career.

Chapter 6

Florida wasn’t a part of my original road trip plan; I was going to go directly from Atlanta to New Orleans. But I’m so glad I changed things up.

One of my good friends from college (actually the one who took the graduation photo above) is from Miami and it worked out that I could visit her. I wound up adding Sarasota (where my grandparents spend their winters) and a family friend in Gainesville to the list.

I will say… Driving from Atlanta to Miami is one of the if not <em>the worst</em> drive in the country. Not only is it like 10 hours long, but you’re not even halfway by the time you get into Florida. And don’t even get me started on the traffic. You know how insane I-270 is around St. Louis? Well take that same intensity but apply it to the last 4 hours of a 9-10 hour drive.

But the views are absolutely worth it. I mean just look:

Miami was idyllic. Sure, the September humidity made things quite hot but that didn’t bother me. I loved how tropical it was and the beaches were fantastic too. Lucky for me I had my friend Kat who could show me around, so I didn’t need to think too hard about what to do.

But Miami isn’t a place I think I could live. Underneath the gorgeous surface layer there didn’t seem to be the kind of substance I wanted to latch onto. Everything was flashy (I swear I saw more Lamborghinis and Ferraris in that one weekend than I did in my whole life) and I felt like I’d lose a part of myself if I stayed too long. Still though, I understand the appeal.