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An Abundance of Reasons

Recently, I was sitting with my family at the dining room table. We had just finished Thanksgiving dinner, and the small talk had continued further into the evening.

Something that my dad said at that table stuck with me. “You always wanted to get as far away from New Jersey as possible. And now you want to come back!” I didn’t think much of this comment at the time, but thoughts about it have slowly crept into my mind.

When applying for colleges, I left any New Jersey school that I found out of the running. I needed to leave this state and go somewhere else. It didn’t need to be too far, it just had to be *out* of NJ. On top of that, I also did not plan on living in New Jersey ever again.

There was an abundance of reasons for me to leave:

1. My town in NJ was full of snobs. I worked at the town pool over the summer, and I was often berated by spoiled SAHM’s or rich young businessmen fathers who did not know how to wrangle their own kids.
2. There were too many people in my town. I longed to live somewhere more rural, and I really disliked how much traffic I had to drive through to get anywhere. There was no nature to enjoy since all of the space was filled up with infrastructure.
3. I wanted to start fresh socially. I was the weird girl in high school, and I wanted to restart with a new group of people. If I went to a school in NJ, there was a chance that I would run into people that I knew.
4. My family was overbearing. My brother was annoying and my parents fought all the time. I needed to get out of that house, and go somewhere that they couldn’t constantly visit me.

There are a few more reasons why I wanted to leave, but those are the most notable. I got my wish when I was accepted into UMass. Close enough where it would be easy (and cheap) to go back and forth from home, but far enough away that my family would be discouraged from visiting me every single weekend. I would finally live my rural college town dreams.

My freshman year of college was blissful. I loved living in a dorm, and I met so many new people through band. Everyone was so nice and welcoming towards me, and I was enthralled by going to parties. For the first time, I felt like I was a part of the group.

My first year in college came to an abrupt end. I was sent home for COVID. Back home to New Jersey. I was going to be stuck at home for an indefinite amount of time. I wanted to be anywhere but NJ. My home was chaotic. My parents had just sat us down on Christmas Day during winter break, and had told my siblings and I that they were getting a divorce. I had just escaped this reality and gone back to college, while my siblings were navigating the newly organized split parenting schedule. And now I was back and stuck dealing with my reality at home.

At first I was fairly miserable. We were barely allowed outside, and I missed my friends. I would spend hours just sitting in my room at my mom’s house, scrolling through Instagram and

doing my best to swipe past any COVID related posts. Then I would do the same at my dad's friend's house, where he was temporarily living until he found more permanent housing. I would sit on my tiny cheap IKEA bed in the room that my thirteen year old sister and I shared, and we tried to make the most of the situation we were both in with jokes and small talk.

As restrictions lightened up, we were able to go outside more. All we could do as a newly split family was explore the outdoors. We didn't want to go too far from home, since rest stops weren't accessible. We were limited to the few parks nearby. I grew up going to these public outdoor spaces, but I had not visited them since before high school. I was just too busy at the time.

I remember my dad dragging my siblings and I out to go hiking one day. The trail he wanted to go to was a little farther than the rest, but there was an accessible bathroom outside of it. On the way there, my dad boasted about a new trail hiking app that he had downloaded on his phone, and how we would not get lost.

We got lost. It wasn't a life or death situation by any means, but we spent a few hours trying to navigate our way out of the trail. My siblings and I were laughing as my dad tried to figure out the app. He wasn't upset by our teasing, he just seemed happy that we were having fun. We brought our dog, Bailey, as well. He ended up finding a huge mud puddle, and flopped into it. His golden fur was soaked in dark brown mud, and he shook off and got the rest of us muddy as well. When we finally got back to the car, we had to work together to put towels down in the back so Bailey wouldn't ruin the car with the mud.

COVID restrictions lightened up even more, and after a year I was finally back at school. When I moved back into a dorm room in spring 2021, I felt homesick for the first time. I would miss the outdoor misadventures that I had with my family. At least I was back at school, where I had felt like I belonged. I had a great time for the rest of my college career, but I couldn't help but wish I could be with my family again and relive those COVID quarantine moments.

I started noticing more differences between Amherst, MA, and my hometown of Ridgewood, NJ. I used to think that my town was unique with its amount of snobs, but now that I was away from home, I realized that rude people exist everywhere. No matter where I went, I would find people that I didn't get along with.

I used to want to live in a rural area. I missed how convenient it was to go to the store in NJ. If I needed something, I was able to walk there. While in Amherst, I needed a car or I needed to wait for the bus. I was used to the abundance of cultures and different types of food near my hometown. For example, if I wanted Thai food, I had many different restaurant options. However, near UMass, I could only find one Thai place. I loved the charm that Amherst had, but I was used to what I had in NJ.

As for my friends in NJ, I realized that I only needed to hang out with the people that I liked being around. While I had some toxic acquaintances in high school, I chose to only hang out with the people who respected me after graduating. I would meet up with my small group of NJ friends during breaks, and I got especially closer to them during COVID.

My family and I have gotten closer throughout the years. My parents splitting up caused a rift in the family, but quarantine helped us become closer, and helped me get used to the split household dynamic. At first I wanted to be as far away as possible due to all of the yelling and fighting, but my parents splitting up meant that they were both happier. It made being in NJ more tolerable, and helped me learn to love where I grew up.

My high school self would have never guessed that I would end up moving back to NJ. That is my post-college plan. I'm soon going to move back into the bedroom that I grew up in. The time spent with my family during COVID helped me realize that all I really needed was in NJ. For the foreseeable future, I plan on living at home and saving up as much money as possible. While living on my own and away from home also has its perks, I now know what I need and what will make me happy. Once I've saved up enough, I see myself still living in NJ.

New Jersey is a hidden gem. Sure, it had some large industrial areas, which is where most out of state visitors end up driving through. However despite being the so-called "armpit of America," I found that I had an attachment to this state, and I can't see myself living anywhere else.