

This is the account I kept from October 9, 2010 – January 29, 2011, while living in the back of 2000 Ford Ranger with my then-boyfriend, Brian Andrich. We traveled over 14,000 miles from LA to New York by way of Alaska, through Texas, and over to Florida. It is one of the best things I've done, and I am eternally grateful to Brian and his truck, the Beast Ranger.

I have not edited it, so please excuse the typos.

TALES FROM THE BEAST RANGER or, that time we decided to be strangers for awhile. by Lillian Meredith

October 9, 2010 – The Day of New Beginnings

I write to you on this, the first night of our adventure, from a parking lot in Yosemite National Park.

Parking lot is not really a fair description – its more like a forest that happens to have space for some cars. That, and an enormous hotel that we couldn't possible afford to stay in. Both seem to have magically materialized out of the imposing woods.

Of course, that could also be because we arrived here around 8pm – dark and hungry and exhausted from having slept little and driven much. So if you asked me, I couldn't really accurately describe my surroundings – we drove in here because there was a sign that said visitors center, and since no one seemed to be working at the front gate, we figured we might find help here. With no map and no real sense of where our campground might be, we definitely needed some advice. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be a visitor's center here at all. But there was a parking space. So, we pulled in, ate some peanut butter and nutella on bread, brushed our teeth and climbed in the back. Finding our rightful place in this enormous park is probably easier done in the sunshine after some sleep.

What keeps astounding me is that I woke up in Venice CA. I woke up in Venice, and after some futile attempts to download the complete Bill Bryson discography, Brian and I walked the four blocks from our (ex) house down to the beach and stood in the ocean. Brian had had an idea of a sort of cleansing ritual, where we would strip down and leap into the Pacific so that it could help us begin our journey with a clean slate, so to speak. But, at the actual early hour, it turned out that standing up to our knees in the frigid sea was perfectly adequate. Actually, to be honest, I wasn't expecting much from the experience, having performed all kinds of crazy rituals during college (including smashing coconuts in front of our bus before my class on Pilgrimage took a rather profound journey

south to DC – but that’s another blog). I was sort of expecting a bracing stand in the ocean before we loaded up the truck. What I found however, after we reached the end of the sand and the water that had pulled away at our arrival came rushing back to smack our legs with cold, was that I did feel cleansed. I guess, not cleansed exactly, but awake and alive, from the cold and from the surprise and from the ground moving out beneath my feet – more so than if I had jumped in head first. I was aware, as the water hit my calves and splashed up to my thighs over and over again, that I was leaving, that my own foundation was leaving me this very day and I was going to feel scared and pained and exhilarated all at once, and today, soon, and for a long time.

We trudged back across the sand and loaded up our truck, took the poems down from the walls, did a final sweep through, and said goodbye to our first home together. I love Venice, I will miss it very much, with it’s painted rvs and drag racers down Rose, and our tiny apartment that looks out onto an alley way and barred windows. I love it there, but it was time to go.

And as we headed out of LA today, we started on a rather ambitious project: we are listening to the entirety of This American Life starting at the beginning and working our way, episode by episode, through the past 15 years of radio shows. So today we began with the first episode, from November 1995, appropriately titled New Beginnings.

So here we are, after driving all day through the rather depressing fields of Central California, past hills that look, as Brian put it, like perfectly toasted marshmallows, and signs from neo-cons blaming Pelosi for their water shortage, through mountains so high our ears popped, dropping suddenly into flatlands of browned crops. I never thought I would come to know California. I never thought I would embark on a road trip with no set time line. As we drove along, listening to Ella Fitzgerald and Nina Simone, I would suddenly, sporadically realize that this trip, this epic trip that we have been planning and dreaming about for over a year, is happening, right now, that I am sitting in this car, having abandoned most of my belongings, with my whole life in this car, that I am driving cross country with my best friend and favorite person, and that we made this happen. And I would feel scared and pained and exhilarated and pleased, just like the ocean told me I would.

October 10, 2010 – The Day of Unusual Loadings

We awoke this morning in the parking lot of an absurdly grand hotel at the relative edge of Yosemite National Park. We found the visitors center and a map,

and were relieved that we had decided to park last night, because there would have been no way in hell we could have reached our campground. It turns out that it's another hour or so up to Tamarack Flats, our chosen destination, through twisting roads which double back on themselves. We abandoned our spot in what turned out to be the employee parking area, and set off into the wilderness.

And oh what a glorious day! The sun was bright, the sequoias were reaching high, and I can't describe how wonderful it smells here. It's dirt and air and a special musky spicy bark smell that must belong to the trees. We drove through the forest for a while, until we finally came to Yosemite Valley. It is astonishing – cliffs of sheer rock stand on either side of an evergreen basin. Waterfalls literally cascade over the sides of these cliffs. It is incredible.

It is incredible, that is, until you enter the valley and discover permanent lodgings, hotels, crowded roads, and concrete. It's like a tourist trap. All of these people crammed in between these two cliffs when there are 3 million acres (according to the map) of Yosemite to camp in and explore. Now, not being much of a camper myself until recently, I understand the appeal of going to stay in a log cabin or a multistory hotel in the middle of a great park – you wake up in your bed, wash yourself in your personal bathroom, and then head out to do some serious hiking. I get it – but it still seems odd that the park would provide so many places for the camping-phobic to hunker down. And not even on the outskirts, but right in the middle of such a really incredible area of land, one which might otherwise be taken up with trails, or even just empty road. But as we wound our way around bikers and parked cars, what started to strike me was the fact that even with all of this activity and permanent human development, it is imperceptible from the entrance to the valley – overlooking the space between mountains, it is impossible to tell that there are all these people moving around down there. It's just that dense. Which is remarkable.

After another forty minutes or so, up a different highway, past recently fired forest, and down a long, single car, dirt road, we came to our own Tamarack campsite. Which had tents, but no people, and a defunct map which listed our campsite 13 as 50. We parked, and proceeded to unload everything out of the car.

See, here's the thing about living in a car with all of your possessions for the next odd number of months stacked precariously behind your seat – in order to find anything, in order to get at the stove that will help you cook the oatmeal which is hidden under the sleeping bags, you have to move some stuff around. Which is fine, except when you think you've lost something.

We thought we had lost two things: our tin bowls, and our bottle of propane for the stove. So after removing the bag of shoes, the bag of winter boots, our bag of

running stuff, our towels, the 7 gallon water tank, the cookware, and various boxes of food, we found the propane, but realized our bowls were not here with us. We improvised when we ate oatmeal this afternoon and soup this evening, but it was sort of disheartening, in that way that makes you wonder what else you've forgotten.

This is, of course, not mentioning the stuff in the back, where we sleep. We had been storing our sleeping bags under our foam sleep pad, but that was deeply uncomfortable, and also surprisingly made things crowded, so we removed them and have now placed them over our food in the front. There is also: the computer bag, our duffel of clothing, our bag of dirty clothes, vitamins, the books we are currently reading, a flashlight that Brian is convinced will be a useful weapon against bears, and an electric lantern. This is, may I remind you, all in a space just big enough for two people to sleep in when its empty. So after searching in vain for our bowls, I proceeded to unload most of the back in an attempt to make things roomier back here for when we decide to sleep. This sort of worked, but mostly made me wonder how often I was going to have to do this, and the answer I came up with was: a lot.

After unloading, reloading in a different manner, realizing we forgot the matches, unloading again, reloading, eating, unloading and reloading again, we headed off down one of our local trails.

It was beautiful. And peaceful. And sporadically paved, which was helpful but also a little strange. We ran into a mother deer with her two fawns, one of whom had separated and was crossing back to his fellows when we approached. We stopped and waited for them to reconvene but the baby was too scared to move, so we retreated and he hurried back across the trail, and we passed by while the mother, twenty feet away, eyed us.

We scaled rocks, we tumbled down slopes and then huffed our way back up, and I was dismayed to discover that in the end, we only went six miles. But it felt like more, and really, isn't that what counts? We came back to camp, stretched on some rocks, and read before unloading once again in order to heat up our soup. Which was really good, and perhaps more so because we it took some time and effort to make it, and then even more effort to put everything away so that the bears won't come get us. Which is the upside to stuffing everything in the back of your car – it makes you appreciate it all the more because you have to work a little to use it.

October 11, 2010 – The Day of Longed-For Sights

Three years ago, when I was living in San Francisco, I went to John Muir woods (John Muir, who loved the trees) and saw my first redwoods. I knew redwoods were tall, but I had no idea how absolutely majestic they are. They are giants, reaching endlessly up towards the sky. Oh wow, I said aloud, these must be the biggest trees in the world! Nope, whoever my companion happened to be replied, giant sequoias are the biggest – they're really immense.

Well, then, I must see them before I die, I thought.

Well, today I achieved this pre-death goal. Brian and I woke up in Yosemite, went for a run, then hopped in the car and drove away from our little campsite, back over the broken road and to the highway. The thing about Yosemite is that all the trees are either sequoia or pine, and they're all immense, but I discovered on the map there are three groves of giants tucked away in the park, and one of them was on our way out. So we parked near Tuolumne Grove and walked the mile down into the woods.

It is so beautiful. The park has constructed a path through the grove so that you can see the trees without trampling all over their roots, but they've managed to make the path seem organic – a dirt path that has developed over centuries of exploration. Of course it's not, but it was nice to pretend. It was all very peaceful and quiet, as we walked among these huge trees, with those weird little branches springing out all over the top, sparsely covered with leaves. But perhaps even more impressive than the living trees were the dead ones, the toppled trunks that lay beside us, spanning 80 feet of path and decomposing slowly, or the dead trunk with a tunnel carved in 1850 and graffitied with signatures from the past 150 years. Little plaques told us about how fire is important for the regeneration of the giant sequoias, how the beetles and squirrels help spread acorn seeds and how the lifeless felled trees actually provide the other living things with nutrients and homes. Evolution: It's a trip. We hiked the strenuous concrete trail back to the parking lot feeling serene and respectful.

Then off we drove, from high sierra mountains covered in trees down into the flatlands of endless fields. California: Also a trip. And after passing through Stockton (thinking of Louiza and Hashimoto) and the San Joaquin, we saw it. There, to our left. In the middle of the highway. What is that strange building? Is it a police look out? No! It's the BART! And there, up ahead! The train traveling the long journey from Pittsburgh/Bay Point down through the city and off to SFO. We were almost there!

I love San Francisco. At the time when I first saw those redwoods, I was in the middle of a seven month sojourn in the city, interning for foolsFURY and working at a boutique. I came back to New York and, although I have readjusted to the pace and excitement of my hometown, I never fail to thrill when I happen to be back in that beautiful city by the ocean. I think it's partially because it was

my first adult home, the first place I ever lived where I had no one and sort of had to make it up as I went alone. But it's also because it's just a really cool city, the architecture is beautiful and totally bizarre at the same time, the colors are so vivid, the streets won't ever let you turn left when you need to. I don't know, I love it here.

So as we came up over the hill, and saw the Golden Gate Bridge off in the distance, covered in late afternoon fog, we both got a little giddy. We drove through the tolls, down the highway and over the incredibly long Bay Bridge, the sky line highlighted by the setting sun, and into San Francisco.

October 12, 2010 – The Day of Necessary Stealth

It requires an awesome amount of agility to urban camp.

Urban camping is actually my favorite kind of camping – I love it because there you are, in your camping truck, with the curtains pulled up, and people walking on the sidewalks next to you, cars rolling by on the street outside, people tucked away in their houses fifty feet away, and no one knows you're there.

At least, no one should know you're there. The problem with urban camping, of course, is that you look homeless, or crazy, or really sketchy, or all of the above, and there is always the potential that some upstanding citizen will call the police and have you removed. This danger is increased drastically when you've been camping for days and look a little the worse for wear, sporting a ratty brown sweatshirt, Brearley shorts with volleyballs on the ass, flip flops, and hair that sticks out in all directions (as mine frequently does).

There is always also the more terrifying threat that someone unsavory will break into the car while you're peacefully sleeping in the back, but considering the fact that Brian and I always pick neighborhoods with signs like "any suspicious activity will be immediately reported," we are far more likely to actually be the unsavory characters ourselves. So, dexterity is of the utmost importance to avoid any prying eyes or sfpd sirens. We frequently stand outside the car, with the back open, pretending we're searching in vain for something, all the while glancing around us for a clear moment when we can gamely climb over the tailgate and into the car, all without tracking dirt from our shoes onto our bed. Then there is the act of maneuvering around all of stuff so that we can make the back comfortable to sleep in, without jiggling the car too much in the process (Brian's shocks are shot, so every movement is like a bouncy castle).

Parking in San Francisco is notoriously awful, but I am here to tell you that it is

nigh on impossible. Not only that, but driving up steep inclines, through tiny roads that really should be one-way, peering terrified over the top of the dash board to make sure there are no errant pedestrians, bikers or cars at the top of the precipice is almost as heart stopping as driving back down the sheer drops of Frisco streets. Parking on inclines is actually physically impossible for me, since I am not a great driver to begin with and get easily freaked out by things like hills and parked cars. Luckily (or unluckily) for us, we can only park on flat ground when we settle for the night because otherwise we'd constantly be slipping one way or the other all night and all our blood would rush to our feet or our head while we sleep.

Brian and I found our destination last night, happily, and slept peacefully, albeit after much whispering and climbing over one another very slowly while shining a flashlight into the blankets in order to see where to put all of our stuff. We made it through the night and managed to climb out in the morning unseen and make it to the gas station.

There is a gas station on Lombard, that has two gender-specific bathrooms that Brian and I have used frequently in our urban camping trips to San Francisco. It is convenient because: a) it is clean, b) it is conveniently located, and c) no one ever seems to notice or care who is going in and out of the bathroom. We brush our teeth, clean ourselves to a certain extent, change clothes, put on contacts, and do all manner of other daily rituals in that bathroom, and no one who works there seems to notice that we keep showing up. Which is great. And a big help in our day to day camping routine.

We spent the day at Philz, my favorite coffee shop in the whole world. Seriously. If you are ever in San Francisco, take the 9 or the 27 or the 33 or the BART to the Mission, and on Folsom and 24th Street, you will find the best coffee you have ever tasted. It's right near where I used to live, and I frequently got so high off of their Tesora blend that I could no longer feel my hands and feet and had to walk slowly home for fear of tripping. That's how coffee should be.

We spent the rest of the day seeing friends. Laura has just moved here from NYC and fits in beautifully. We spent the afternoon in Dolores Park, and when Laura left for the Sunset District, Brian and I met up with my former housemate Stephane for dinner and a drink.

Then Brian and I headed back to our car, drove around, found a parking spot in record time, and settled in, sneakily and undisturbed, for the night.

October 13, 2010 – The Day of Camaraderie

Brian and I are about to be alone for an extended period of time. Driving through the Yukon to Alaska, swinging back through Canada to Montana and Colorado and New Mexico and Texas, all places where we really know no one. We most likely will be spending Thanksgiving and Christmas alone, just the two of us.

This is fine. I like Brian very much. You might even say that he is my favorite person in the world. But in preparation for this experiment in total companionship, we have been seeing as many people as we can on our way north. And what is neat about coming back to a city where you once lived is that there are many people to see and catch up with.

What's actually sort of funny about this is that most of the people I hung out with while I was in San Francisco have moved. Justin, my first post-college friend, Lila, my Berkeley Rep friend, Angela, my boss and buddy at foolsFURY, and Jon, my Vassar friend and constant cohort in SF theater, have all returned to New York. My fellow intern Diana has moved to Santa Barbara. My roommate Yael has moved back to Israel, my roommate Martin has moved back to England, and my roommate Sandy has moved to Arcata (where I will be visiting her shortly). So in some ways, my subsequent visits to SF have been filled with the ghosts of three years ago.

But then, there is Ben and Deborah. I moved to San Francisco, a city I had never visited, in the fall after my senior year of college, because Ben offered me a six month internship with his theater company foolsFURY and I thought oh hey why not and took it. I figured it would be a standard internship position – getting coffee, sitting silently during meetings, and performing fairly menial work. Instead I found myself a member of the company, researching for Ben, sitting in on rehearsals, providing voice over for the show they were putting up, understudying roles, and taking part in classes. But I spent most of my time working for Deborah, the education director, organizing, contacting teaching artists, setting up camp, and then getting to assistant teach at the camp and run day care. It was a blast, and ended up being so much more than I had hoped it could be. It taught me how working in an ensemble could be, how to have an artistic and an administrative stake in a company, and it means the world to me that I am a part of foolsFURY.

I have seen both Ben and Deborah, as well as other members of the company, at various times in New York, doing workshops and going out, and Ben has hired me since my tenure as his assistant to do research for him. So although I didn't get to see Deborah this trip, I know that I will see her soon. Ben was busy but had an hour, so Brian and I stopped by a café near CCA where he is teaching to chat, which was lovely.

Brian and I then stopped by Philz (PHILZ!!!!) to do some work, and then met up with his friend Ericka, who is from his hometown, and her roommate for

Venezuelan food, which is delicious (who knew?). And then it was off to Berkeley to see Stephane.

Stephane was my other roommate in San Francisco. The house was set up so that Martin lived in one room, Stephane lived in another, and I lived in a bigger room, first with Sandy and then with Yael. The house was amazing for a lot of reasons – it was big, it had comfortable furniture (including the best red chair in the whole world), high ceilings, a back yard, and the most wonderful shower pressure. But what was really nice about living there was the atmosphere. It was extremely communal, sharing food and hanging out in the living room and in the shared room. Part of that was because half the people living in the house lived literally in the same room, but part of that was Stephane. He established a tone and mood in our day-to-day lives that I have come to covet in every home environment since then, one where roommates hung out together and dinner was shared, and movies were watched. The only other house I had ever lived in at the time was my senior housing, and that apartment was so beer drenched that none of us really spent time in the common areas unless there were at least 20 other people there as well. So to live in a house with adults, and have a living room and a kitchen and a bedroom where we all felt welcome and we all spent time was a really nice change and one I have tried to establish in every living situation since then. I was extremely lucky my first year out of college, both with my job and with my living situation, and I think these factors contribute in large part to my extremely warm feelings towards this city.

So when Stephane offered to put me up for a night in his new Berkeley residence, I was so pleased. Brian and I showed up and spent the next couple of hours sitting in that amazing red chair, hanging out with Stephane and his wife Cari, who had been his girlfriend while I lived in SF and who had been part of our communal space as well. Stephane and Cari were just recently married, so we got to see wedding photos (which actually might be my favorite activity – if you have been married recently, I have probably stalked your wedding album on facebook), and then we chatted before heading off to sleep. In a bed. Which was it's own small joy.

October 14, 2010 – The Day of Leaving San Francisco

California is enormous.

Having grown up on the East Coast, I am comfortable with states that take about four hours to cross. New York is probably about seven or eight at its widest. Pennsylvania is, of course, absolutely enormous, just hill after rolling hill of trees

and trucks. If you google map the state, you find that by major highways it really only takes about six or seven hours from one side to the other, but it certainly feels interminable.

But there is nothing in the north east, or frankly anywhere east of the Mississippi, that can compare to the vastness of California. Starting at Mexico, if you drive for ten hours, you are still only slightly north of San Francisco. Eureka is approximately half way between Canada and Mexico, and you still have another two or three hours left before you hit Oregon. It is ridiculous.

This all hit home yesterday as we drove out of Berkeley, after a hot shower (thank you again, Stephane and Cari!) and one last stop at Philz. We decided to swing by Palo Alto to see my friend Anna, who is valiantly pursuing her MFA in documentary film at Stanford. I had only passed through Stanford once, three years ago with my family – the Merediths have a particular affinity for exploring college campuses that we are not actually associated with. Whenever we find ourselves in a new place with some leisure time, we inevitably find the nearest institution of higher learning, and go check it out for ourselves. This never seemed weird to me until recently, but I'm almost positive its not our strangest past time, so it doesn't bother me too much. Anyway, we drove down the coast to Big Sur, and on the way drove through Stanford, because my father had heard it was an attractive campus and none of us had ever seen it (Tom and I weren't allowed to apply anywhere that far away from my mother). We drove Palm Drive, decided it was not as pretty as Vassar, and moved on.

But I think we were wrong. It is completely different from Vassar – it has none of the old red brick and trim lawns, the arboretum full of autumnal trees or the gothic academic buildings. What it does have are quads filled with stucco stone and arches rounded like they were made out of clay, tiles sliding down roofs and a bright hot sun. Anna showed us around, walking us past sculpture gardens and hidden forests of art from Papua New Guinea, and I found it all rather lovely and charming. The architecture is beautiful and uniform, something I admire very much in a college, and the quads were well maintained and full of lush vegetation. I was very impressed. And the food was awesome. Vassar had really shitty food.

We left Stanford as dusk was settling into night, and headed for Ukiah. We chose Ukiah for really no other reason than that it is halfway to Arcata. And that drive took three hours. And we are no where near the border. And we better get used to it – Canada gets closer every day.

October 15, 2010 – The Day of Errant Ease

We awoke in the parking lot of a hotel in Ukiah, climbed into the front, and drove across the street to the Walmart to use their bathroom and clean ourselves up a bit. And there we were reminded of a very pleasant fact.

We are in Northern California, an area that starts with San Francisco and travels to the border of Oregon. There are many beautiful things about NorCal – the redwoods, the ocean scenery, the drive-through coffee bars (genius!). But the most wonderful thing, at least from our perspective as transient truck-dwellers, is the local tolerance for the homeless and the wandering.

According to Brian, there were two other vagabonds in the men's bathroom of Walmart that morning, washing up and readjusting their enormous backpacks. As we drove out of Ukiah, we saw more than a few RVs with hippies parked inside. Hell, there's a buddhist monastery just outside of town that takes in travelers.

We drove the three hours on the 101 to Arcata, and arrived shortly after my friend Sandy had left to take a job east of here. She has been living out of her van, parked on the Humboldt State University Campus, so we figured that was a good place to camp out. We staked out a space in her former parking lot, and settled in for the rest of the day.

It was a brilliant idea. Brian informs me that HSU is best known as the biggest weed smoking school in the country, and I have to admit that I have never seen more dirty hippies in one place before. This doesn't bother me in the slightest, being pretty dirty myself right now, and it actually allowed Brian and me to fit right in as we wandered the campus.

It also happened to be parents' weekend, so there were all kinds of people roaming the campus, exploring. As we hunkered down in the back of the truck to read and write, a car pulled up and a father got out of the front.

"Is this your dorm room?" He asked.

"Sort of!" I said.

"No," corrected Brian. "We're sort of passing through."

"Oh. Great!" He seemed to think this was neat, and when he returned with his family an hour or so later, he pointed us out and wished us luck. I tried to picture my own parents (or Vassar campus police) responding with anything other than horror at a couple of 20-somethings hanging out with the tailgate open, reclining on what is clearly their bed, in the parking lot of student housing. But no one seemed to notice or care, including the various grounds people who traipsed by, who pretty much ignored us. That night, everyone who swung our way assumed we were hot-boxing, and left us alone.

The downside is that there were people who were actually getting high on every side of the car, all night until 3am, laughing hysterically and talking about stuff that made absolutely no sense. Oh well – at least we didn't feel lonely.

October 16, 2010 – The Day of Our First State Border

We have crossed the line – the border line (keep pushing me!).

Yes, we have entered the land of evergreens. And boy is it beautiful.

We left Arcata later than expected, leaving our little corner of HSU to find a laundromat. There we shook the cracker crumbs out of our bed and washed our underwear, among other things. A guy played ukulele. A dread-locked couple sat on the ground in the parking lot and stared at a big open map. The fog rolled in and the ocean lay beyond. It was all rather picturesque. But we had to move on, because we couldn't stay.

So on we went, through the high mountains of Northern California, past autumnal vistas that made me miss the northeast. We drove through tiny towns on winding roads, past many many billboards demanding a stop to the monument, whatever that was.

We drove, and listened to Bill Bryson expound on the many virtues and vices of this great culture we call our own. And then it happened.

We crossed to interstate five, something we try to avoid as much as possible but in this case was pretty much necessary, and as we cascaded above the valleys we had so recently been mired among, we came to the edge of California.

Brian pointed out that he had never been out of his home state for more than two weeks. I realized the longest I had ever been out of New York State was six months, and I was living in California that whole time. So this was exciting for both of us.

We drove until it got dark, attempting to get to Crater Lake but failing and settling for a little campsite forty miles away. We pulled in, too exhausted to cook food and fell soundly asleep.

October 17, 2010 – The Day of Unexpected Conclusions

Oh what a beautiful morning!

It also happened to be a surprisingly cold morning, as we climbed out of the back of the truck and saw our breath. Oh my, I thought, that's surprising. Then we got dressed and went for a run.

I am a boring runner. I will always take the least interesting path, in order to avoid having to think too much while I'm focusing on the torture I'm inflicting on my body. Brian on the other hand is far more adventurous, and because of this lucky coupling I was spared an unbearably tedious jog around the four campsites (which was my initial idea) in favor of a jaunt down an unknown hiking trail and around the Lost Creek Lake, which we had apparently parked next to during the night.

It was amazing. The trees were in full autumnal bliss (as much as they can be when they are not situated in upstate New York), and the path snaked around up and down the side of these cliffs that plunged down into a beautiful lake. That sentence make the run sound rather harrowing, but it wasn't – the path was protected on all sides by trees, so I was never concerned about falling, I just jogged and admired the foliage and blue from the water. At one point, I sprinted down this hill, only to find a little wooden bridge followed by a canopy of yellowing leaves. "Oh yes!" I cried, before I noticed the dangerously steep hill that followed.

We made it, and returned to the campsite warmed and healthy. We went to take showers and, miracle of miracles, the showers were free! And warm! We returned to our little campsite scrubbed and fresh, I in my new boots (which are fantastically warm and comfortable), and we made oatmeal and tea and tried our hand at the Sunday NYTimes crossword. After failing to complete it, we took off to Crater Lake.

My friend Megan is from Oregon, and she recommended the spot to me. So thank you Megan, because it was really cool. The lake was formed when a volcano collapsed in on itself 7,000 years ago. First of all, holy shit. Second of all, this means the lake is completely free standing, with no water flowing in or out of it, and it contains a small volcanic island inside the crater. When you drive up there, you end up on the rim of this deep bowl, which contains deep deep blue water. We got out, climbed around, and returned to the car.

Here's the problem – we're kind of on a deadline. We're trying to get to Alaska before the end of October so that we can be out of there before it gets deathly cold. Which means we are missing incredible opportunities for exploration. We did not spend the kind of time I would have liked to have spent at a place like crater lake. And this was really our only day in Oregon, which is a pity for a variety of reasons, not least because it's state animal is the beaver, and my K-12 all-girls school mascot was the beaver, and therefore I feel a certain affinity for

the state. So our trip to crater lake was short, but totally worth it.

So we continued to speed through Oregon, ending up in the central part of the state, which doesn't look anything like you would expect Oregon to look. Everything points to this being the greenest state in the union, next to Vermont and New Hampshire. But it isn't so. The middle is a high desert, with barren trees and a landscape dotted with canyons. It is sort of strange and you feel somewhat misled. More than that, however, is the fact that we passed a drive-through coffee shop – YES! – only to discover really sub-par coffee. Sub-par doesn't cover it – it was swill. Just awful. What the hell, we looked at each other in dismay. Isn't this the land of incredible coffee? Apparently not.

After another few hours, we came to the Columbia River. As big as the Hudson and covered from one end to the other with bridges and dams, it's really impressive. So we said goodbye to Oregon and headed into Washington, figuring we'd find a campsite on the other side of the river. But the nearest campsite was to the east, which did not look so appealing, and besides my friend Megan (again!) had highly recommended the Columbia Gorges, where she had been married, and that was to the west (albeit on the other side of the river), so we figured we'd head that way. There has to be a campsite somewhere, we said to ourselves.

Well, we were wrong. Not wrong, exactly, but we found exactly two campsites, and both were deserted and sketchy. So we kept driving, figuring we'd have to find something before Portland. And in the meanwhile, the scenery was astounding. There, to our left, loomed Mount Hood, but in between it and us lay the incredible mountain scenery surrounding the swiftly moving Columbia River. The sun setting over the hills of trees, we were so glad we had turned West, and were sure that when we found a place to rest, it would be beautiful and worth the trip.

Well, here we are in Portland.

It occurred to us about 20 miles outside Vancouver, WA, that we were totally out of luck as far as camping went, so we figured we would find some Walmart or something in Vancouver and urban camp it for the night. Even though it was only 7pm, we were absolutely exhausted. Driving for hours and hours will take everything out of you – it's all that sitting. Neither Brian nor I are sedentary individuals, and so the constant inertia combined with the concentration of not crashing the car for seven, eight, nine hours, takes its toll on your consciousness.

We drove into Vancouver and immediately realized that there is absolutely nothing there. At this point, I was realizing that we were facing the prospect of being directly across the river from Portland, and I was not going to see my friend Ashley who lives in town. So I called her. No answer. So we parked in a swanky neighborhood and tried to figure out what to do next. Just as we were

about to make a run up the five towards Seattle, Ashley called back. We chatted, I told her where we were and she, being awesome and a frequent couch surfer, offered her drive way and/or living room furniture for us to crash on.

So, even though we had expected to bypass the republic of Portland, we have ended up drinking excellent coffee and eating a bagel in a coffee shop called Anna Bannana (spelling correct), waiting for Ashley to get out of her Sam Shepard play. I'm glad we're back – glad to see Ashley, glad to explore Portland a little further, but glad most of all that we have not left Oregon quite yet, that we have the ability to tarry just a little longer in the beaver state.

October 18, 2010 – The Day of Skipping Washington State

Today we skipped all of Washington State.

The real pity of trying to get to Alaska before it gets too cold is that we're actually sort of too late. It's fucking cold up there already. So really we're just trying to get to Alaska and turn around before it gets so unbearably cold that we start turning blue and I'm forced to turn to Brian and say "We have to get a motel room or I'm going to lose all of my toes." Actually, Brian is more likely to say that to me because I'm stubborn and would rather lose my toes than change my plans (just kidding, Mummy).

So it's sort of a race against the season of winter, which has already arrived in the arctic north. The shame is that it means we've had to breeze through a lot of the west coast that we would otherwise have spent days in – hiking along the Cascades, exploring Portland's many coffee shops, traveling to the eastern side of the state, and seeing any part of Washington other than Seattle.

That's right. Today, we woke up in Portland, had a lovely coffee with Ashley while she and I talked shop, and then we hopped in the car and hightailed it up the I-5 to Seattle. It was a pity, because the five is not really all that nice anyway – it's just sort of a big interstate. And what makes all this even sadder is that we've actually had incredible luck with the weather, which in the northwest is usually notoriously rainy and gray, but has been bright and clear and crisp the way fall should be. It would have been nice to explore the state with a little sunshine, but alas that was not our fate this time.

We have, however, had the pleasure of exploring Seattle. We arrived early enough to do a little work in the Chinatown public library before driving around a bit. Then we headed over to have dinner with my friend, Brett, who grew up in the area and has been living in Seattle for the past couple of years. Added bonus:

she and her boyfriend live on a house boat! Let me repeat this: house. boat. This is by far the most awesome living situation I can think of (besides a truck, of course. No, who am I kidding? It is the most awesome living situation including a truck, hands down. It's a boat that's a house!). We had a really excellent dinner, adding vegetables back into our diet for the first time since we left, and sitting on the edge of the boat and watching the water. What a beautiful evening.

Then Brian and I retired to the truck and tested the truck's resistance to cold, because although bright and sunny, the northwest is also bracingly cold right now. We're in luck – we stayed warm all night. Alaska, here we come!

October 19, 2010 – The Day of Family

Brian has more family than anyone I know.

Not being a member of a large, close extended family, I guess I am not the best judge of these things. Anyone who sees their relatives on a semi-regular basis seems to me to have a large and tight extended circle of kin. I see my cousins on my mother's side every few years for weddings and graduations (although I am hoping that I will see them when we swing by DC), and my other cousins – the Meredith cousins – I haven't seen in over a decade. I wouldn't know any of them if they walked up and slapped me in the face. Same goes for my uncle, my father's brother, except that he is tall and bald and white just like my dad and grandfather, who I also haven't seen in almost four years. So I am generally impressed by anyone with a stronger familial track record than my close knit group, but the Andrich clan is, I believe, really impressive.

To give a little background, Brian's father's family is from the Seattle area, where they migrated from Croatia (I believe I have this all right, but the Andrich/Martinovich/Burnhams can correct me if I'm wrong). From there they formed a small clan in San Pedro, CA, and an even smaller one in the deep south, but the vast majority of them remain in the northwest region. Last summer, for the fourth of July, Brian and I came up to the Puget Sound, crossed the water by ferry, and ended up on Whidbey Island in the small town of Maxwelton with more members of the family tree than you could shake a smoked salmon at. They had gathered not just for the annual summer holiday but for Great Aunt Leona's 80th birthday. I had known Brian all of a month, and his shocking lack of awkwardness at introducing me, an extremely recent girlfriend, to almost all of his relatives was almost as wonderful to me as his family's complete willingness to accept me at once. Cousins, both immediate and distant, aunts, uncles, and perfect strangers were warm and friendly, and no one questioned my presence or gave me inquisitive looks. They just sat me down, gave me a beer and expected me to be buzzed by sunset. We slept in the yard across the street from the house,

dressed in red, white and blue for the holiday, and spent the week eating fresh clams and pie and a whole host of other food that seemed totally endless. I was enchanted.

So when we rolled into Seattle this time, Brian eagerly called Monty. Monty is Brian's father's cousin. I don't think my father even has any cousins. I'm not sure that he knows if he has any cousins. And here we were, preparing to set out towards Monty's house in Shoreline.

Before that journey, we did work at a local coffee shop (we cannot, of course, neglect the coffee of Seattle, since all northwestern coffee is wonderful and rivals New York for consistency in quality, surpassing it in atmosphere and culture). We then wandered around Capitol Hill, which was hipster-y and fetching, running across a car with a Vassar College decal, which I creepily peered into to see if there were any other defining characteristics before Brian got so embarrassed that he started to walk away. We then drove the long way to the suburbs.

Seattle's suburbs are as pretty as Seattle itself, and frankly there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of differentiation. So the city merges effortlessly with the surrounding towns, all of which have pretty, tree-lined streets and eventually lead to some body of water. Again, the day was lovely, and we drove rather aimlessly until we made it to their street.

In what I am beginning to understand is something of a defining trait of Brian's family, Monty's house was decorated for Halloween. And I don't mean a carved pumpkin and maybe some scary looking spider. I mean the tree out front hung with plastic pumpkins like those bizarre Easter egg trees, a giant goulish figure attached beside the front walk and one more atop the lower roof, black streamers hanging near the door and a skeletal decal plastered to one of the windows. And that was just outside. Inside, there was another freaky creature clawing at you as you entered, with more streamers and decorations in orange and black, with pumpkin cutouts lining the mirrors, and the table set with a halloween themed table cloth. And they hadn't even put up the giant inflatable pumpkins which usually line the roof. How wonderful is that?

Brian's father's cousin's daughters, Shelby and Joanna, were home and they entertained us, gave us tea and beer, while we waited for Monty and Jan, Monty's wife. We heard tales of college and boyfriends, and told them about our trip. Then, Gwen showed up. Gwen is Monty's sister, so therefore also Brian's dad's cousin, and I met her (along with everyone else) last summer. I mention this only because I want to point out that she remembered my name and various important pieces of information about me (as did everyone else), and I hope this illustrates yet again what a genuinely warm group of people Brian's family is. Monty came home, and then Jan, and we sat down to dinner.

It was delicious, and we even had the pleasure of eating chanterelle mushrooms that Monty himself had picked and sauteed with butter and onions. I am always terrified of eating wild mushrooms, as I have been warned against it many times, but I figured that since everyone else was eating them as well, we would all have to go to the hospital together and therefore stood a better chance of survival or something. Anyway, nothing happened and they were excellent.

Following dinner, Brian and I sat up and chatted with Monty, and then headed off to bed in one of their spare bedrooms. It was warm and comfortable and we drifted off to sleep easily.

October 20, 2010 – The Day of International Moonshine

Oh Canada! I wish I knew the words and/or tune to the national anthem of our friendly neighbor to the north because I had a serious hankering to belt it out, but alas I only know the title. Oh Canada Oh Well.

Before we crossed the borderline (keep pushing me! I do know that song...) we had a couple of stops to make. We needed:

- a) an oil check (check! thanks Jiffy Lube)
- b) a cup of chowder (check! White Clam AND Smoked Salmon)
- c) a visit with Cliff and Leona

Cliff and Leona are Brian's great aunt and uncle who live on Whidbey Island, and who hosted us last summer for the fourth of July. We took the ferry across from Seattle to the Island and drove out to see them for the afternoon. It was, as always, lovely. Leona has the best personality of anyone I've ever met – just lively and effusive and funny and warm. Cliff, on the other hand, is super man. Brian and I agreed – the man makes his own wine and drives from Seattle to Florida every year while living out of his van for a week. Needless to say, they are a lot of fun to be around, and we had a nice visit. As we were leaving, Cliff insisted we take with us a bottle of his homemade blackberry wine, vintage 2009. This is easily the coolest gift I've ever received. So with this new addition to our truck, we struck out for the Klondike.

Of course, it's not like Canada is right next door to Seattle. Anyone who has ever looked at a map will realize that. I, clearly, haven't ever really examined a map, or am still under that northeastern impression that distances really aren't that impressive. So after another couple of hours, we finally made it to customs.

Here's a little interesting tidbit on my traveling companion: he gets nervous around officials of any variety. Customs makes him particularly uncomfortable, partially because he's never really had to go through it, but mostly because it's a man in a uniform asking a variety of questions about intent and belongings. So as we neared the border, he kept asking me questions like "What are we going to say our reason for going into Canada is?" and "Do we need to declare these bananas?" Luckily, I was driving and I am a daughter of my mother, who can get (and has gotten) sausages past US customs on return flights from Europe. Of course, this skill was useless in this situation, considering the fact that we weren't trying to sneak anything over the border except possibly the homemade wine, but it did help smooth our transition.

"Where are you coming from?"

"Well, I'm from New York and Brian here is from LA!"

"What is your purpose for traveling to Canada?"

"Well, we're on a road trip around the US and your country is sort of in the way." I smiled. Border patrol didn't, but he didn't bother us after that, and I like to think that I brightened his day.

And so we entered Canada. I have only been here once before, when I visited my great aunt Sis' island in Ottawa when I was ten, and Brian has only ever been here once on a road trip to Vancouver. So we were pretty thrilled. And prepared to drive late, considering it was already 4pm.

We came to Vancouver and grabbed some coffee at a local hotspot (Yelp was a big fan). Brian was taken, and thought the city was absolutely beautiful. I liked it OK, the architecture was a little too modern for my tastes but the mountains and the rivers were incredible, with the mist rising out of the valleys.

And then we headed north, as darkness fell and the moon, almost full, rose above the scenic highway. Which, of course, we couldn't see because it was night. I was sort of bummed at first, because our guy at Jiffy Lube had told us that we had to take this highway, that we would never see vistas like this ever again. And here we were in the dark. And yet, as the moon grew brighter and the traffic thinned out, we were treated to an amazing night drive. The moon turned everything hazy and highlighted anything remotely white, turning whole mountainsides into beacons of pearly light. The moon felt like a search light, hitting us between trees and streaking our faces. The highway was a two lane road, winding through the mountains and Brian saw, in the darkness out of the light, a bear turn his head and watch us go past. That was it – just us and the bear and the moon and mountains.

And the stars were dwarfed by the moonlight except for the big dipper. I always

had a hard time, growing up, seeing the big dipper – my constellation of choice was always Orion. But there is no missing Ursa Major in the north – the basin is enormous and clearly visible, obviously a giant spoon or ladle or rectangle at the end of a line – whatever you want to see, you can't help but see it. It's amazing. The Alaskan flag does not lie – that is one impressive constellation.

And so we drove until we just couldn't drive any more, until we came to our first tiny town in the mountain range, and we pulled over in a hotel parking lot and passed out, exhausted from our accomplishment of the day. We are on our way to Alaska.

October 21 – 23, 2010 – The Days of Endless Canada

Holy shit, Canada is immense.

Now I know most of you are sitting there, reading this and thinking “Duh, Lillian. Look at a map.” But I am here to tell you that I DID look at a map, and I thought I too understood how large Canada is.

I did not. It is bigger than anything ever.

I have lumped these days together for a couple of reasons. All Brian and I did on these days was drive. Hours and hours of driving, anywhere between ten and fourteen hours at a go. Endless driving. It was incredibly boring. Well, actually that's not fair – it wasn't all boring, but it certainly doesn't merit separate posts for each day. And aside from the fact that all that driving is not really all that interesting for anyone to read about, there is the fact that because we were driving so much, I didn't have the time or the energy to write up posts every night – I pretty much just conked out as soon as we crawled into our little camper home.

As someone who is pretty mobile, I was not completely aware of how tiring it can be to be completely sedentary. I usually walk miles every day – I always try to leave myself an extra hour or so to get anywhere in New York because I like to walk from point A to point B, only hopping on the bus or taking the subway if I'm running late. So I didn't understand that when you sit for hours and hours and hours, your body sort of gives up on you. It thinks to itself “Oh, well, obviously I'm not needed, I'm clearly not important at all, so I'll just sit over here in the dark and give up” (my body has a nasty passive aggressive streak). And so you find yourself inexplicably tired. You haven't done anything to warrant wanting to crawl under the covers and never get up, but there you have it – you can't imagine doing anything except falling fast asleep. This corporal shut down,

coupled with the intense mental concentration it takes to not drive the car into a ditch after five or six hours of staring at a featureless road, is a pretty deadly combination. And so, for the past couple of days I have done nothing except falling promptly to sleep every time we cease driving for the day.

But the days were not lost. Not by any means. We saw Canada! We discovered various things about this vast country that we might not have otherwise ever known.

We learned that Canada has terrible roads. Now please understand, Brian and I were on major highways – there doesn't seem to be any other choice in British Columbia and The Yukon – highways with important numbers and encased on the map with leaf outlines. These highways, however, were bumpy, icy, unplowed, and frequently without lines or rails. There we were, on hour seven of an interminable drive, staring at a two lane road which seemed to have been paved about twenty years ago and not visited by any official since then, with no lines to indicate lanes or edges, and often no barrier between us and the ravines below. Woah, Canada. Woah. And we kept seeing signs that were telling us about all the improvements that were happening on that particular stretch of road (“Action Plan D’Action” – I love that everything is in French and English), signs with COMPLETED plastered across them, and yet there we were, bumping along and trying to figure out what the roads must have been like before they were fixed. We were sort of transfixed with them, at how bizarre these highways were. And I have to tell you, there was a noticeable difference the second we crossed into Alaska.

The scenery was by turns absolutely breath taking and startling boring. Brian had a bigger problem with this than I did – he loves mountains and beaches and all things magnificent. I do too, but I also can drive pell-mell across Missouri and be fascinated by the consistency of it all. We drove up ranging cliffs, and then suddenly found ourselves in endless plains, dotted with strange and lonely towns of one or two buildings. On the cliffs we saw mountain goats, not twenty feet away from us and once, when I was sleeping (damn), Brian and the car were chased down by a rabid wolf who escaped from his forest lair. And then we were in civilization again, but still completely isolated.

There is a lot of Canada that is empty, and there are clearly a fair number of people who like it that way, who have no desire to be around great crowds in big cities and enjoy the solitude. Even Whitehorse, which you may or may not know is the capital of The Yukon (I certainly didn't know that), is small, nestled not entirely beautifully among some snowy mountains – and it too feels cut off. I find that wonderful, mainly because it is so different from my own desires. That is, of course, why we travel – to learn about people who live differently than we do, in the hopes that it can give us some perspective on our own existence. I feel lucky to have traveled through these towns, many of them old prospecting

towns, where once even more solitary pioneers eked out a way of life. It all feels preserved. It gives a whole new meaning to my understanding of “rural.”

We had no reception for most of our Canadian sojourn, so *This American Life* wasn't an option. We did, however, have a copy of the audio book *In A Sunburned Country* written and read by Bill Bryson. My family got really into Bryson's audio books when I was a kid, and we used to listen to them whenever we were in the car. The wonderful thing about Bryson is that he is smart and extremely verbal and funny while always remaining fascinating and educational. He inserts bits of history and fact into his wayward anecdotes, so that you end up learning a tremendous amount about whatever subject he happens to be writing about. In this case, it was Australia, and we started and finished the book within the span of Canada.

Bryson spends an awful lot of time talking about how desolate and lonely Australia is, with far apart towns and single building out posts, and I couldn't help comparing his journey through that hot country with ours through this cold one. Australia is obviously very different from Canada, but considering the fact that he's never written a book on Canada, one empty colonial country is as good as another. And I would much rather drive through Canada and listen to a history on Australia than the other way around, partially because Australia is deeply fascinating and exotic and partially because there are no giant poisonous spiders in Canada.

That's because it is extremely cold. We have now passed through three different seasons, starting with Indian summer in Venice, going through fall as we traveled up the northwest coast, and now we're officially in winter. I'm talking winter coats, hats, gloves, scarves, boots, the whole nine yards. At night we wear gray flannel onesies, purchased at the Walmart in Whitehorse when we realized it was below freezing. If you can't picture this, please imagine an older gentleman at the turn of the twentieth century, sporting a flannel onesie with bottom flap and a smartly waxed moustache across his slightly femme face. Now picture his button-bottomed nightwear on Brian and me. Now picture us in winter hats and socks, and you have our pajama outfit. I don't care how ridiculous we look – the long johns are fabulous and I will not sleep without my hat. It is in the teens at night and we live in a truck – it is really really cold.

On our final day, we passed from The Yukon into Alaska. Never in my life did I think that sentence would apply to me, but there you have it – we drove across the state boundary into our own country again. And that night, as if on cue, as if welcoming us to the northern most part of our country, we saw the Aurora Borealis.

I can't express how excited I was. I had been hoping we would see the Northern Lights, but I figured it must be a fairly rare event, something I probably wouldn't

get to see during our one week in Alaska. And yet there, as we drove past Tok, after the unending twilight that seems to be characteristic of this part of the world, I saw it. I was looking up at the sky to the west, out of the passenger seat, staring at the giant Big Dipper, when I noticed a streak of green. I turned in my seat and saw this faint green light painted across the sky. I couldn't believe it – I made Brian pull over and we both stared at it. It was faint, but it was definitely there, and it was beautiful – an unearthly green across the sky and under the major constellation. We climbed back in the car and drove off, but as we went, it started to change, to swirl. The light was actually swirling in the sky. I asked Brian to pull over but there was no shoulder so we kept driving and I kept staring at the line of green as it changed, started streaking out from its base and up into the night, with white and red starting to appear, the green deepening and glowing. It was amazing. It was so beautiful. I never thought I would ever see this glow, but it was right outside my window, and it was as eerie and lovely as I thought it would be. When it faded out, the bright full moon took over and relit the mountains, covered in snow, like it did the first night we entered Canada.

We're here. We have made it to Alaska.

October 24, 2010 – The Day of Disheartening Realizations

We rolled into Anchorage early, having slept on the side of the highway relatively near the city. After days of granola and crackers, we were ready and eager for a hot meal. Yelp, a boon to traveler and citizen alike, helped us zero in on Snow City Café, a local hotspot for brunch, so we parked at the end of town, facing the water, and went for food.

The wait was an hour, which is always promising in a weekend brunch joint, so we sat outside at a table and drank our coffee and learned a little bit about Anchorage. It was cold, but nothing a hat and well-zipped coat couldn't fix, definitely above freezing but not by a lot. We sat huddled around our coffee cups until our buzzer buzzed and we were seated.

Well it was wonderful: hot eggs, cheese, reindeer sausage, crispy hashbrowns, sourdough toast and homemade jam. Brian had bacon in his "Heart Attack Plate" and it was easily some of the best bacon I've ever tasted. I was so impressed and pleased, and found myself wishing, as I looked around at the burly men and women surrounding me, that I lived in a frigid climate so I could justify hearty breakfasts like this more often. The coffee was terrible, but I suppose Brian and I will just have to get used to that since not everywhere can be the northwest, and it didn't really matter because we were in a pleasant food comma. Satiated and vaguely sleepy, we bundled up and headed off to explore.

Anchorage is small. I had absolutely no idea – I had sort of pictured this majestic city surrounded by snowy mountains and icy sea. The mountains and sea are there alright, but the city is really a town. It's about the size of Oneonta, NY, and sort of similar in feeling. For anyone who is not from Delaware County, Oneonta is a big college town in upstate New York, with a Main Street and a few side streets, little shops and places to eat, and a triple A minor league baseball team. It's quaint, and so is Anchorage. We wandered the downtown, walked up and down side streets, sidled past the Performing Arts Complex and Park, looked into art galleries and artisan stores, came to the main square with its rose garden and soccer field, and found ourselves back at the water. We walked a trail behind the highway, next to an inlet and pseudo-suburban homes, and then made our way to a coffee shop on 6th Street to do some work. The University of Alaska is evident all over downtown, which has some Alaskan hipsters and skate boarders. There are also a surprising number of homeless, which I found disconcerting considering the cold must be lethal in the winter. In the coffee shop, the kids were plugging their indie music and pumping the volume up. The coffee was atrocious – just flavored, caffeinated water – but the vibe was nice and it was warm. When the shop closed around 6pm, we left to find a Laundromat, and once all our clothes were clean we set out to find somewhere to camp out.

I was surprised to discover, when I looked at my map on my phone, that there is a whole other side of town. Downtown Anchorage feels so compact – tiny but sufficient – and I didn't know what might be across the way.

It was sprawl. Endless, mind-numbing sprawl. It was hideous and spreading out in every direction, with at least two Walmarts, a few McDonalds, a couple of major supermarkets, and so on and so on.

We went to a supermarket to pick up some bread, and then sat in the car in the parking lot of this windowless monolith, listening to This American Life and eating peanut butter sandwiches. And as I stared at the featureless highway, it hit me.

I could be anywhere.

Here I was in Alaska, the last frontier (as the license plates proudly proclaim), a place I never thought I would ever be, and I could have been sitting in the parking lot of a giant food complex in Cincinnati, or Des Moines, or LA for that matter. I actually could have been in Oneonta – not the quaint Main Street, but the hideous strip that lies just outside, with its Hannafords and Walmart and Office Depot and Home Depot and, redundantly, Lowes.

I knew that it would be like this. I understood, in my brain, that this is what America has become, but I didn't know how it would feel to travel two thousand miles and to feel like I haven't gone anywhere at all.

I sat with this sobering thought, and got increasingly depressed. I started thinking about Orwell's 1984 (a sure sign that I'm not feeling so peppy), and I began to think that the reality of Orwell's 1984 was not in government take-over, but in corporate blanketing. The world was becoming one giant corporation and we were all its drones – eating the same food, thinking the same thoughts, wondering if I should go to this McDonalds or that McDonalds for dinner. The fear in the 1950s (and, I dare say among some circles, still today) was that the government would be the agent of this mind-numbing conversion of individuals into drones, but in fact it has become apparent that it is capitalism, the supposed savior of the masses, which has taken over our lives. By trying desperately to avoid a communist future, we have ended up in a different kind of hell, one where diversity is swept aside for convenience. We drive through endless miles of mindless highway, and walk unending aisles of florescent crap, and we wonder why we have become so stupid. Or we don't wonder, we just sigh and accept. Or we see something shiny and cheap and we forget. And I, an unwilling participant, take for granted the fact that I will find a Walmart parking lot where I can sleep for the night. Hell, I'm typing this on a MacBook with my Iphone at my side. This is what we, as Americans, have become – one big consumer of all the same shit. And I am no better than anyone else.

Part of the reason I undertook this journey was to discover how people in different parts of the country live. And what I realized in that instant was that many people live like this, amid the sprawl. And part of this adventure was to realize that there would be a lot of identical country out there, and to deal with this fact, to process it even though it is upsetting, and then to try to find the parts of each society that have managed to remain intact. I am in Alaska, and no amount of fast food chain stores or Barnes and Nobles outlets could change that. I am in Alaska, where the coffee sucks and its fucking cold. I am in Alaska, and soon I will not be in Alaska anymore. So I better find a way to look past the ugliness and find something beautiful.

Behind the sprawl sat the mountains. And beyond that, endless miles of snow. And beyond that, oil fields. But there are still mountains, and the people who choose to live next to them.

I think it is a desperate shame that we have taken the individuality out of our societies. I think we have a lot to answer for, and I think the really sad part is that for the most part we are unaware of what we have done.

Tomorrow I will go back to the downtown, sit in a coffee shop with all the weirdos who live downtown and feel more at home than I could ever feel in the bright neon lights of a shopping mall. But for tonight, I will sleep in the safety of some nondescript hotel parking lot and be grateful for its safety and furious at its destructive presence.

October 25, 2010 – The Day of Leaving Anchorage

We woke up with the sunlight, feeling better than the night before and prepared to re-embrace Anchorage anew. We set off from our little hotel enclave to find a public library where we could do some work.

Well, we couldn't find one. We used our phones to map out their locations, and then drove around trying to find them. And inevitably we would pass the spot where google maps purported they would be, and find nothing but a large shopping complex, or a walmart.

Spirits sank. So we went back to our coffee shop from yesterday, and spent the day doing work there. And when we were done, we left Anchorage.

We checked out our map and tried to figure out where to go. I had wanted to go to Homer, because a friend of mine is from there, but it is four hours from Anchorage, and it was getting late. So we opted for Whittier, a coastal town where the Alaska Marine Highway stops, and which is only accessible by car through a one-lane tunnel. This tunnel is, according to Wikipedia, one of the longest tunnels in North America. It also houses a tracks for the train to travel on – there is really only one way in and out of Whittier if you are not in a boat or airplane.

This continues to astonish me. There are so many little towns in Alaska, and most of them do not have a main road. You cannot reach them if you are in your car. If you try to google map them, google maps will try whole heartedly for a few seconds, and then apologetically return to say that there is no way that you can drive there, walk there, or take public transit there, and that it is stumped. I think that's neat. And since Brian and I are not going to be taking any planes or boats this trip, Whittier seemed like the closest we could come to an isolated Alaskan town.

We missed the road to Whittier and got almost to Hope before we turned around and tried again. This time we made it, paid the toll, and sat waiting for the traffic release into the tunnel – scheduled for 9:30pm. We saw a few cars coming out of the tunnel and driving into the wider world. The tunnel looked sort of like a Dutch house, with a slanted roof and wood beams, except it was embedded into a mountainside. It looked ludicrously small in comparison to the mountain, and I suddenly had an idea of just how much weight it must be supporting.

And then it was our turn. The lights turned green, and we and one other car, listening poignantly to Hallelujah by Leonard Cohen with the volume turned all

the way up, drove into the mountain. It was so cool. We drove on train tracks, the sides of the tunnel open rock. It was long and sporadically lit with orange light, the way all good tunnels should be. Finally, we broke free and came into Whittier.

I had read that Whittier has one big building where most of its citizenry live. I hadn't really understood what that meant, exactly. It turns out it means exactly what it says – almost everyone in Whittier lives in one big building together, up against the side of a mountain. It's not huge, but its like a standard size New York apartment building, only deeply unattractive. We drove up to it, past various temporary structures, car parts, and – this was creepy – beached, abandoned boats, to the parking lot of the building, thinking we might park there. As we pulled in, a youth passed us, heading towards the mountain, ostensibly to do some drugs. We changed our minds and ended up parking near the water, next to a series of touristy shops and the ferry terminal. Saying touristy shops makes it sound practically vibrant – please don't misunderstand, I mean a couple of buildings that clearly had commercial purposes. Off to the side, down the one road we could see the Anchor Inn lit up. The lights blazed from the big building. Everything else was deserted and dark.

We went to sleep, and wondered what on earth Whittier might be like in the daylight.

October 26, 2010 – The Day of Strange Alaska

We awoke to the scariest, most unearthly sound I have ever heard. It started as a light humming, which I, in a sort of sleepy haze, didn't think much of. But then it grew, to a point where it became sort of high pitched and loud, almost vibrating the whole car. Brian and I looked around in terror – is it an alien invasion?! What the hell is going on?!

And then it disappeared. And so we awoke in Whittier.

We got out of the car in search of a bathroom, and found one in a permit building. As we searching, a Whittier patrol car pulled lazily across the parking lot, stopped, and a woman got out and went into the building. She didn't acknowledge us at all. We walked in – toilets on the bottom floor, and no one there. When we left, we grabbed a couple of apples from the car, and went off to explore the town.

It is deserted. To be fair, it's winter in Alaska, and Whittier is clearly mainly a stop on the way from the Marine Highway to Anchorage and the state beyond. The shops are all next to the ferry, and all kitschy and gimmicky. It made sense

that they were closed, since there are definitely no tourists in Whittier at this time of year.

What was strange was that there didn't seem to be anyone in Whittier. There were a couple of trucks moving across the parking lot, and some machinery at work in the port, but everything seemed to be operating by itself. I mean, of course it wasn't, but I couldn't tell that there was any human activity going on – no voices, no sounds other than the machines, nothing. It was weird. As we walked back through the abandoned shops, a bald eagle swooped by us and landed on a light post.

There was a bald eagle who lived in Delhi for awhile, out in a tree by Route 10, that I once saw from afar in its nest. That was cool. This was cooler. We got so close to the eagle we could see its eyes. That is a huge bird, and intimidating – we decided to respect it and only stared at it for a few minutes. Wow. My faith in Alaska was renewed – any place that could harbor serious wildlife like that among people is pretty great.

It doesn't change the fact that Whittier is a truly strange place. We drove past the single building and around back, discovering a school with one light on. Then we passed by a second housing structure, this one considerably smaller, and made our way to the old abandoned building.

This is apparently somewhat of a tourist destination. It's a big empty condemned building. It's flooded and graffitied and clearly unsafe, and there are rumors there are bears and wolves living in it. And yet tourists seem to scamper up and into it all the time. I read that before I came to Whittier, and I kept wondering how the tourists would be allowed to get into the building if it were condemned – wouldn't the police come get them? Now that I stood before it, I realized that there aren't enough people in Whittier to stop them.

The building has been sitting there for decades, and you might wonder why it doesn't get torn down. According to Wikipedia, the reason is that they can't do anything with the debris – there's simply no way to get rid of it. It would take ages to cart it all through the one-lane tunnel. So there it sits. This fact characterizes a lot of the town. There are abandoned machinery parts everywhere, car hubs and whole boats, and bric-a-brac. The whole place has a sort of shabby, worn down air to it. Paint is peeling and temporary wood has been placed over holes. And there doesn't seem to be a whole lot anyone can do about it. The swing set is missing a swing, the basketball court sits on gravel and has no hoop nets. It all feels ghostly and sort of sad.

And yet it is situated in one of the most picturesque spots I have ever seen. Huge mountains on all sides, with little frozen rivulets of white, incredibly green pines, and the water of the bay stretching out to the ocean. It's beautiful. It feels special and secret. I can't believe they made a town here. I'm very impressed.

We left Whittier, and promptly drove past a glacier. I had never seen a glacier before, and was surprised at how easy it is to spot. It is vivid blue. There were little pieces floating in the water, and they too were vivid blue, so it's clearly the ice itself. It's bright, almost florescent. How weird. How cool.

We drove back through Anchorage, pausing at a little wildlife walk that had no wildlife and turned out to be a pr move by the highway association. It was nice enough, but that explained why none of the plaques discussed conservation. Of course, it did provide the nice tidbit about how bears are frequently sighted in Anchorage and seem to live there along side their human neighbors. Again, Alaska redeemed.

We stocked up on water and gas, and headed north. Unfortunately this meant we had to pass through Wasilla, but I was pleased to discover that, at least from the highway, the scenery was unattractive and the houses were typically ugly. We read about Levi Johnston, another Alaskan oddity, to amuse ourselves on the pass through town.

We paused by the side of the highway and made dinner, the first hot dinner we have made for ourselves since Yosemite. Green beans and rice – wonderful. We drank the rest of Cliff's wine (it was wonderful, Cliff! Thank you!), brushed our teeth, and crawled into bed as the mist was descending onto the land, covering everything in a cold wet.

October 27, 2010 – The Day of Denali

When I met Brian, he was headed to Denali.

Not Denali, exactly, but Chris McCandless' magic bus, which is practically in Denali. He was going to Alaska and he had a destination, and I was just along for the ride. Of course, we never made it. We got as far as the Puget Sound before we had to turn around, but I know it has been a goal of his to get to Alaska's National Park, and today we were finally headed there.

Going to Denali is a much bigger deal for Brian than it is for me. I was excited to go to another national park, but Denali no more than Yosemite or Yellowstone. We drove past barren mountains covered with snow and sparse with trees, prickly pines of spindly height, and although we couldn't see giant Mt. McKinley rising out of the earth because of all the fog, we knew it was there – we'd seen it the day before, from 200 miles away.

I cannot get over the extremity of western landscape. I have never ceased to be amazed at the epic quality of California terrain, how it goes from vast ocean to flat valley to jagged mountains covered in redwoods – coming from a land of

gently rolling hills and bucolic scenery, this is quite a change of pace. Alaska is no different – the harsh temperature makes the tundra sparse and sturdy, and the mountains are sheer in their expanse.

I was sort of glad we were seeing Denali in the winter – I know that in the summer it must be beautiful, but in the winter you get how powerful it is. And besides, most of the time it is winter, so why kid ourselves – this is what it usually looks like.

We arrived in Denali and discovered we were pretty much completely alone. A slight snow had fallen, so we were able to see all the many animal tracks as we walked from the winter campsite to the winter visitor's center. The main visitor's center is closed for the season, so the whole complex is dark and deserted – so few people visit in the cold that they just transform the science center into our information hub. There, we found a ranger who helped us figure out what we wanted to do and where we wanted to hike. She told us that hiking the road past where cars are allowed to go was the best bet because of the views and, if we were lucky, we might see “the mountain.” She also told us about the dog kennel, where they house the huskies who patrol the park in winter. I am by no means an animal person but I've been on something of a dog kick, wishing for a little puppy and finding this desire totally bizarre and out of character. Maybe I miss my parents' dog. Or maybe I'm gaining a soul. Who knows, but the kennel sounded like a fantastic idea.

So Brian and I trekked the mile back to our camp, made some beans and decided our schedule. Brian wanted to take it easy – he was a little overwhelmed at finally being in Denali, and he wanted to go to the kennel and then come back and read, make dinner, listen to this american life and go to sleep, then hike in the morning. I thought that sounded like a fine plan, so we took off to see the dogs.

The visitor's parking lot was under construction (people really don't go to Denali in the winter), so we parked on the road and wandered through park headquarters, a series of buildings that look like they're made out of logs. As we rounded a corner, we heard the dogs barking, terrific barks, loud and deep and vaguely threatening. We paused – that's how intimidating these barks sounded, and then forged ahead.

There, in a clearing, were the huskies. There were a few that were tied to chains outside, and then a few in cages. We read the rules before we entered, and we were instructed not to go any closer to the dogs than their chains would allow. If they wanted to be pet, they would come to us. The dogs were barking ferociously, deep and, well, husky barks. There was man with a little baby leaving the kennel, and the baby looked at Brian and me with a wild sort of fear as it passed. I didn't blame him, the dogs were freaking me out, too.

That is, until we approached them. It turns out they were barking because they were so excited to see us. They came running up to the edge of their chain, sniffed us, and then turned around so that we could pet their backs. Their eyes were blue or brown, but all were sort of alien. These were serious animals – lean and powerful – but they clearly also adored humans. We went around to each dog, sometimes having to hurry from one to another because each anticipated our coming touch and would start to whimper.

Again, I am not a dog person, but I was totally won over. I was about ready to steal a huskie for myself. At the end of our little tour around the kennel, one of the dog trainers came out to chat. She was friendly, and told us about how the dogs love people and get kind of lonely in the winter when there aren't as many visitors.

We asked her how much snow they need to start sledding, and she said about eight inches. And then she told us that in recent years the snow has been pretty minimal, not starting usually until early November. This may seem early, but it turns out that up until just recently, the snow was falling heavily by mid-October. Now they're lucky if they get enough snow at all. How sad – a global warming Alaska. With that depressing thought, we headed back to our campsite.

It's still plenty cold in Alaska – not as cold as it should be, but colder than I'm used to. Brian and I bundled up and sat in the back reading. I'm in the midst of Gail Collin's book "America's Women: One Hundred Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates and Heroines." It's wonderful, and I highly recommend it. On our way into Denali we heard a man on the radio discoursing about the differences between men and women, about how men are goal oriented and women aren't, and how all those damn liberal academics will get all shocked and upset if you so much as suggest that maybe women don't aim for success, that careers are for men biologically, and that women only want careers of their own because of a post-1960s cultural phenomenon. As proof, our commentator described a time when he washed a dish (a phenomenon in itself, I'm sure) and he kept saying "Look at that dish! That's a clean dish!" and he opined that women "who have probably washed thousands of dishes" never get impressed at their own work. The level of stupidity is so profound and the thought process so backwards that I felt like crying for the state of our intellectual souls. So it was a relief to read Gail Collins, if not also mildly infuriating to be reminded that women couldn't even vote until 1920, and then relied on men in Congress to pass the measure for them.

After that internal rant, which is not in any way unique to Alaska, I helped Brian make some soup for dinner, and then we crawled back into bed and listened to *This American Life* as it got dark. When we crawled back out to brush our teeth, we saw that night had fallen properly, but more than that the haze of the day had cleared and we were staring at a sky full of stars.

I've said it before, the big dipper is enormous up here. If you ever wonder why the Alaskan flag has the big dipper plastered across it, this is why. It is easily the most impressive constellation in the sky. I always had trouble locating the dipper growing up – Orion was much easier for me to see – but here there is no question. It is amazing. So Brian and I stared at it until our windows fogged up, then we hopped out, brushed our teeth, and scrambled into the back where it was warm.

October 28, 2010 – The Day of Longed-For Comfort

We awoke in bitter cold – layered with our thermals and sweatshirts and hats and two pairs of socks each, and still slightly frozen. So we hopped out, jumped up and down a few times, and headed off to hike. We drove up to mile five, where the road was closed for construction, and started up. We were told that if we made it to mile nine we'd be able to see Mount McKinley, and I was eager to get a better look at it. After about a mile, a ranger drove towards us and told us she was opening the road to mile fifteen. This was exciting news indeed, considering that usually by this time of year the road is definitely closed that far into the park. We scampered back to the truck and drove to mile fifteen.

Fog hangs on mountains. In an otherwise blue sky, the clouds cling to the peaks and make their tops all but invisible. And Mount McKinley is no exception. So although the day was bright, we saw no giant mountain in the distance, just endless gray. Actually, the haze surrounding the valleys makes the park that much more surreal – I had never heard of something called the Alaskan bush, but that is what Denali is covered with. It's too cold up there for great majestic trees or tall flowering plants, so the ground is covered with a sort of brush, which in the summer must be green but most of the time is stripped. The trees are all windswept and scraggly – this is not to say that the landscape is unattractive: it isn't. It just feels sort of foreign and desolate and enormous. It feels like wilderness, harsh and unforgiving, with no rolling green hills or leafy trees to temper it. It's just vast and empty and breathtaking. We came to a river and walked along its frozen edges, chipping at stones and staring off into the river valley. Then we turned around and drove away.

We visited the dogs once more (I have never had a keener need to be around animals before), and then headed off to the Stampede Trail, the last outpost of civilization that Chris McCandless saw before going to his death in the magic bus.

Chris McCandless has been something of a hero to Brian since his decision to

quit his job last year and go explore. It's not so much the going out into the wilderness unprepared and dying part, but rather the capitalism is bullshit and society is fucked up part. When I met Brian, he was living out of his truck, eating granola bars and reading Thoreau. Personally, I hate Thoreau (probably mostly because of tenth grade English class), but I was deeply attracted to Brian's devotion to a simpler lifestyle. More than that, I am inspired by it, and in the last year have attempted to alter my own consumption choices to fit in with a more conscious appreciation of what our consumerism is doing to us as a people.

So driving the winding dirt road, seeing sights that McCandless probably saw, was unnerving to say the least. In situations like this, when you come to a place you have longed to see, that represents something important in how you see the world, it is often hard to know how to feel. Reverent? Joyful? Sad? Disappointed because it cannot possibly be what you want it to be? It is, of course, ultimately just a place, a road, where people live and cars drive. But it is also so much more, more than any one place could possibly embody. So we drove along in silence, looking at the scenery, and when we got to the place where the road was flooded and icy, we turned around for the highway.

We drove for another couple of hours until we arrived in Fairbanks, and there we got a hotel.

"A hotel? A hotel!" I hear you cry. "Lillian, you just finished this diatribe about your awareness of your own consumption and Brian's devotion to a McCandless vision of capitalism! What the fuck?!"

I agree, and here is my response:

You have no idea how cold it is. It is so cold that Brian and I were vaguely concerned that we might freeze in the night. And another reason:

I am applying to grad school, and I have been trying to do this from the truck. Unfortunately it has been so cold that as I type my fingers grow numb and I have to keep pausing to thaw them. These are not ideal conditions for writing personal statements, and I wanted to make sure that I got at least first drafts of all my essays done before the end of October. Fairbanks seems as good a place as any to get a hotel room and hunker down for a day to work.

Plus, Brian and I smell and we need a shower. And the truth is you can value a Thoreauvian vision of man and society and still welcome a nice warm bed. Thoreau certainly did. I probably shouldn't be so hard on him.

October 29, 2010 – The Day of Work

Today I wrote my graduate school application essays.

There's something so odd about writing personal statements about how much I want to be a director while in Anchorage amidst an epic road trip. It's hard, mostly, not to include my feelings about my current situation, to tie the road trip into my desire to work in the theater, even though the two are separate. Or worse, to bring the adventure up and then justify it, as though I'm doing something wrong in not working on a show right now. But mainly, my life is so consumed right now with this experience, as it should be, that to bring myself out of it and try to explain my accomplishments and goals as an artist feels very forced and extremely far away.

But I persevered! I wrote a first draft for each of the schools, including editing a previously existing one. I hate them all, but at least it's a start.

And it was awfully nice to be inside and clean. We awoke to at least four inches of snow outside. The beast ranger is now, in Brian's words, a snow ranger, and it looks sort of quaint and helpless covered in its heavy dusting. I am so glad we are not inside staring at our breath.

It was, by all accounts, a very productive day. We even got some exercise in at the hotel gym – which consists of one bike machine, one elliptical, and one treadmill. So I did the elliptical and felt good and refreshed, and then we stretched our aching stiff limbs and returned to the room. We ventured out once for food, and then spent the evening with some wine and all the episodes of 30 Rock and Community that we hadn't yet seen.

Lucky us. Happy snow day!

October 30 – November 1, 2010 – The Day of Endless Canada, Part Deux

Canada did not get any smaller while we were in Alaska.

Brian and I woke up with a sense of foreboding at the next few days of driving. What a long road ahead of us, with so few people.

If we're going to be honest here (and, since it's my blog post, I feel we should), I am not actually a nature person. I like national parks, I enjoy camping, but at the end of the day I would choose the city over the country any day. I love being around people and activity, I far prefer walking city blocks surrounded by stuff and life than hiking hours in the woods without a scenery change. The main excitement for me on this trip is exploring the various cities we come to: San

Francisco, Portland, Seattle, and soon Denver, Boulder, Santa Fe, and so on. I think cities, when they're done well, are things of great beauty.

So driving through upper British Columbia and the Yukon is not my idea of a good time. The most incredible thing about the trip is that there are all these towns on our little Canadian map – albeit two or three hours apart from each other – that are actually just a single building. So after a few hours of driving winding roads through the mountains, staring out over empty space and passing maybe three cars, Brian and I would feel a pang of excitement approaching these little outposts. Oh boy! Maybe we can get some coffee! See a few human faces! There'd be signs – gas in 2km! And then we would drive into town. Or rather, we'd drive past town, because the town in question is a single building, usually closed and overgrown with gas. No other roads lead off towards twinkling lights – just that one building, with no one in it.

When we did find open gas stations, we would pause and get gas, uncertain of when our next chance would be, and when we'd enter the station (which is inevitably also a lodge and restaurant) the lonely girl behind the counter would glance up hopefully. Once, we paused at a breakfast place and walked in. The girl leapt up from her seat and beamed at me – “hello!” and I felt so guilty when I said “oh umm where's your bathroom?” Her face fell. We were probably her only customers all day.

The one exception on this endless parade of nothing was the wonderful Signpost Forest at Watson Lake in the Yukon. It is literally a forest of signs, all nailed to wooden stakes. There are thousands of them, dating back at least to the late 1980s and probably farther. The signs are license plates and handmade signs – in the summer there is clearly a craft stand set up. The signs say things like “John and Judy, our second Alaskan adventure!” or “Ya'll come to Dallas!” Some are advertisements for various stores in different parts in the country, and some are wooden cutouts of their home state. Some draw maps, and others flags. There were people from Germany and France and Australia. And amid all these rows of signposts are benches and a little wooden bridge, so that you can sit and relax and contemplate how many people from all over the world passed by, how many people are on adventures like you are. It's sort of poignant and beautiful, and I left feeling connected and joyful – what a wonderful world we live in.

But that was a rare highlight. To be fair, British Columbia is at times incredibly stunning – mountains everywhere, and deep valleys, and that overwhelming sense of loneliness. But it is exhausting to drive through, and after fourteen hours, the scenery stops being so appealing. We did, however, see lots of bison. Like, a whole herd. They were lazily grazing by the side of the highway (such as it was) and we paused while one of them slowly crossed the road, licking the street, stopping in the center, staring at us unperturbed and settling in to a long stare down the road ahead. We ended up having to drive around it, since it clearly

wasn't interested in moving, and we inched passed it as it watched us go. It was totally thrilling, and I am pleased to say that between Canada and Alaska, Brian and I have seen eight animal species we had never before encountered: a wolf, a bear, scrambling mountain goats, a bald eagle, caribou, various retreating moose, little red foxes, and now bison. And I will never stop being grateful to this vast north country for that.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the fact that Brian and I only got through Canada because of Bill Bryson. I have already mentioned my deep attachment to his prose, but further than that he helps me put some perspective on my political and social leanings. We spent the whole of the Yukon and British Columbia listening to "Adventures of the Thunderbolt Kid" which chronicles his life in 1950s small-town America. As we drove from nothingness into pointless strip, I listened to Bryson decry the loss of vibrant downtowns and bemoan the future of our urban landscaping. I felt, if not comforted, at least not alone in the conviction that we can and should be doing better than this by our small cities and large towns. I have already touched on this particular theme, but it comes up again and again for me, and I expect this will not be the last time I mention it. I have never known a time when strip malls didn't rule the country, have never existed in a McDonald-less universe, and in some ways that makes me lucky because I don't know what I'm missing. But it does depress me to realize that there was a time when places were singular and we were special and localized in our shops and restaurants. At the same time, as much as Bryson lauds the 50s as a time of individualized optimism, he also reminds me that we once lived in a country where red-baiting and fear mongering were an accepted part of our political system, when you could lose your job for not naming names, among much else, and it certainly helped me put this current election cycle into perspective. We may have completely lost our minds and be subject to a racist fear-based cultural upheaval fueled by ignorance and hysterical pundits feeding us our political beliefs and politicians who encourage stomping on the heads of opposition supporters and arresting members of the press, but at least we're not any crazier than we ever were. Besides, we don't have to hide under our desks any more – not yet, anyway.

On the evening of Halloween, we passed into our first real town in days and discovered fireworks. When we asked the gas station attendant about it, he said it was a Halloween tradition. I think people should find more reasons to set off fireworks, so I was pleased to watch them over the baseball diamond (yes, baseball. Apparently they play that up here). And the following morning we passed into Alberta.

Alberta is much more my style – fewer overwhelming mountains, more farmland. It's just prairie, but there are people on the highways and big towns and farm equipment. More than that there are oil fields, where men wearing road work uniforms toil in black dirt, which is not so great, but it seems to be a

major part of the economy up here. The climate here is much kinder too, and we were able to walk around with our heavy winter coats open to the elements.

As we drove, the sky turned gray and we found ourselves amidst a rainstorm that did not stop. It would pause slightly, and then the skies would open again. We were headed to Banff on the advice of my brother's girlfriend, and we figured we could make it to Lake Louise that evening. As we drove into Banff national park and headed up into the Canadian Rockies, the downpour turned (shockingly, abruptly) into a blizzard, and we found ourselves skidding on snow trapped roads high above plunging valleys. That was more than slightly unnerving, and we had our first real chance to try out our chains.

In case you are not from a cold climate yourself, I am here to tell you that chains are wonderful and absolutely necessary if you are lacking four-wheel drive. We went from skidding all over the road in a really terrifying manner to clearing a path through the blanket of powder for the cars lining up behind us. The snow created a white-out and we could barely see the mountains on either side. Then, just as abruptly, the snow turned back into rain. We took off the chains and continued in the encroaching dark, and staring at the sheer cliffs on either side, covered with pines reaching up to their summits.

As it got darker, the rain got heavier, and we had to admit that we were not making it to Lake Louise that night. We had been hoping to cook up a hot meal with our stove that night – had, in fact, been fantasizing about it for some hours – but we had to abandon the idea, and we spent the evening eating granola bars and playing Scrabble on Brian's phone. The inside of the car got increasingly wet as rain dripped in from the back and the sides, despite our best duct taping efforts. What a bummer.

November 2, 2010 – The Day of Cold Lakes and Hot Meals

In the middle of the night, the rain stopped. At least, that's what we thought. It turns out it didn't stop, it just turned into snow, and so was soundless. We woke up cold, again, climbed in the front and headed off towards Lake Louise.

I am glad we didn't try to make the drive at night. It is beautiful – the mountains are covered in tall green trees and have sheer cliffs which reach towards the sky. Despite the snow, the sky was bright, and it was a lovely drive to an even lovelier spot. Lake Louise is spectacular – surrounded by mountains which provide it a glacial runoff every spring, the lake is bright blue and very large. On the side of the shore sits a giant hotel, which I was worried would detract from the scene,

but is in fact rather stately and grand. If they have to build a hotel next to Lake Louise, I'm glad it was this hotel. Brian and I went for a stroll on one of the trails around the lake, admiring the clearness of the water and the intense scent of pine all around us. The snow fell harder and we retreated to the car and continued on to the town of Banff.

I was expecting a tourist trap, and it was certainly that, but it was quaint none-the-less. The buildings were old and architecturally consistent with their mountainous surroundings. There were lots of people on the street, all of them looking flushed and healthy, so we grabbed coffee and joined them. We strolled from shop to shop, tempting ourselves with fancy restaurant offerings on street side menus and comparing fictional dinner options. We passed the high school and the various hotels, and then headed back to the car to drive on to Calgary.

I was immensely pleased that we visited these places, albeit briefly. I, not being interested in skiing in any way, had never heard of them, and probably would have missed them altogether in my drive to get out of Canada if it weren't for a conversation I had with my brother's girlfriend before I left. She was adamant about going to Banff and her mother actually emailed my brother a bunch of info about the place and Lake Louise. Brian and I are very grateful, because it was an absolutely beautiful day. The Canadian Rockies are breathtaking, far more lush than any mountains to the west and very stately. This is my introduction to this renowned mountain range, and I'm so excited to head down into Colorado to explore them further.

We drove, listening to Bryson's history of Shakespeare, and then hit the suburbs of Calgary. I was disappointed – more sprawl? But I sucked it up because we were on two very important tasks:

- 1) clean and vacuum the inside of the car
- 2) do laundry

By this point, Brian and I had run out of underwear and had been wearing the same clothes for a few days, so the situation was getting desperate. And the car had become so revolting that every time we climbed in we sighed and tried to pretend that lingering rotten smell didn't exist. Plus, we'd lost some things somewhere in the back of the cab, and we really needed to find them. And there were almonds everywhere.

So we found a car wash and had one of the most invigorating cleaning experiences of our young lives. We cleared out the raisins and cheerios and almonds, vacuumed up the dirt and grime and granola crap, unloaded everything and reloaded it in a way that made more sense, threw out little scraps of garbage, and generally made it a livable environment again. Then we found a Laundromat and did four loads of laundry, including all our bedclothes and our

damp comforter. Then we made our bed with our newly cleaned sheets, changed into clean clothes, and, feeling much much better, headed into downtown Calgary.

And I was forced to eat my disappointment. True, Calgary is surrounded by endless suburbs, but the downtown and surrounding area is really nice, with an art community and various restaurants, and bridges over rivers. It is a really picturesque town. We went in search of a burger joint called Rocky's, discovered it was closed and, vowing to return tomorrow at lunchtime, found instead a pub.

There should be more pubs in North America. We each had a pint of local beer and shared a shepherds pie made with bison meat while watching soccer. What a great way to spend the evening.

We were meeting up with Brian's friend Tommy around midnight when he got out of work, so we had a few hours to kill – so we found a coffee shop and I reintroduced Brian to lattes. I'm afraid I've got him hooked now. With a new jolt of caffeine, we headed over to Tommy's house.

Tommy is a former professional hockey player who, at 21, went to college in Calgary because Canada will allow all their former professionals to attend school for free. I think that's wonderful. I was, however, slightly wary, because Tommy and his roommates are a bunch of college boys, and from what I recall of college, boys in school are not exactly the cleanest bunch. Hell, I wasn't exactly the cleanest. It's a generally unsanitary time. So as visions of off campus Vassar housing swam through my head (44 Lagrange, I'm looking at you), we drove up to Tommy's front door just as he was getting home from coaching kids hockey.

I needn't have worried – the house was immaculate. It's cleaner than my apartment in New York. The decor is thematic, with hockey jerseys hanging on the walls (including, Tommy would like me to mention, a USA jersey – we know where his loyalties lie). We sat and watched hockey for a while with Tommy and his roommates, while I marveled at their rather apparent Canadian accents. Even Tommy, the little brother of Brian's best friend Victor and therefore originally from San Pedro, had developed a slight accent, but that's not all that suprising considering he's been living in Canada since he was sixteen. I had noticed on a map that there seems to be a new province called Nunavut, and I was pretty perplexed by this development, so I checked in with the boys – all of whom are native Canadians except Tommy – and they confirmed that yes, in the past fifteen years since I had made a map of Canada in my fifth grade geography class, Canada had in fact divided the Northwest Territories into two separate provinces. I include this little tidbit so that in case this development had escaped your notice, you won't feel like a jackass the next time you look at a map – I would have appreciated the information certainly.

We stayed up to about 1:30 (way past Brian's and my bedtime) and then we

headed off to sleep in the basement, which they lovingly referred to as the dungeon. The bed was broken and on the floor, with springs sort of pushing into our backs, and laundry was scattered all over the floor around the washer and dryer, but it was warm and indoors, and we were deeply grateful.

November 3, 2010 – The Day of Big City Canada

We awoke to footsteps.

Let me rephrase that: we awoke to thunderous crashes above us that we figured out after a few moments of panic were footsteps. The dungeon's ceiling is not exactly insulated, and any sound from the first floor – a soft shoe on the kitchen linoleum, for example – was amplified beyond recognition until the whole basement was pounding with sound. As more boys woke up, went to the kitchen, got breakfast, turned on the TV, and generally started their day, the more random bursts of thudding we got down below. At one point, someone dropped a plate, which startled both of us to an upright position. This all started probably around six in the morning – and bear in mind that we went to sleep not all that much earlier. So we slept in fits, trying to block out the noise, for another few hours. Then, when the house was silent once again, we checked our phones, realized with dismay it was ten-thirty, and went to take a shower.

What a glorious shower. You really begin to appreciate cleanliness when you aren't clean very often. It is a beautiful element of modern society and I promise I will never take it for granted again. Our bodies and hairs squeaky, we got dressed, made our strange misshapen mattress, and headed out into Calgary.

First stop: Rocky's Burgers. We had been craving ground beef for days, for some strange reason. In the endless mountains of British Columbia, I had even gone so far as to buy beef jerky at a gas station, which I like well enough but have certainly never searched for among grocery shelves. So when we got to Calgary, we immediately yelled "burger" and came up with Rocky's, a five star location.

Rocky's is a converted bus that lies motorless on the side of a street in the more industrial area of town. It is bright red and has a sign that proclaims "Home of the Meat Orgy –Gormet Magazine." Yes. We ordered a bacon cheeseburger with everything that came with it – in this case onions, mustard and relish – and some fries. They had vinegar readily available (I assume because Canada less further removed from British culture than the US is), and we poured it all over our fries and went off to one of the picnic tables near by split the beef. It was wonderful. One of the best burgers I have ever had. And as a bonus, there was a

vegetable tent nearby, selling fresh fruits and vegetables from BC as well as various homemade pies and loafs and jams. We grabbed a couple of apples and some green beans, and then went off in search of a coffee shop.

You might notice coffee shops appearing all over these updates. The truth is, there is absolutely nothing I love better than a good coffee joint. I developed this passion in SF at (where else?) Philz, and have been a devotee of unique coffee shops ever since. Any time I go somewhere new, I try to find some hip little spot with free wifi and a few seats, and on this adventure it has become even more important to me because that is where I am able to do my work most effectively. Luckily for me, Brian is also a big fan of a good local coffee shop, and together we make quite an obsessive team.

So off we went in search of coffee and wifi. We found it in the form of Phil and Sebastian, a sort of upscale coffee bar in an active suburb. The ceilings were high and the place had a sort of modern feel, with electric light bulbs encased in metal and all geometric angles. It actually felt like Soho, and as long as I didn't look out the floor-to-ceiling windows, I could pretend I was in some fancy shop on Lafayette somewhere.

We worked until closing at 9pm, then headed back to the house. We sat with one of the housemates for a while, discussing Saskatchewan and Canadian red necks. We then watched the movie FUBAR in an attempt at cultural immersion. Then Tommy came home and we hung out. As we were getting ready to go back down to our dungeon, Tommy offered to sleep on the couch, thereby giving us his room. We made sure that he was sure, and then gladly accepted. We went to sleep even more grateful than we had been the night before.

November 4, 2010 – The Day of Big Sky USA

In the morning, we went to Tim Horton's.

Full disclosure: I grew up eating fast food. Every weekend, when we would head upstate, my parents and brother and I would gorge ourselves on chicken McNuggets and double cheeseburgers from McDonald's. Saturday mornings, my dad and I would drive to Oneonta for the paper and pick up a sausage McMuffin with cheese and a hashbrown for each of us (and a diet Pepsi for my dad), and head back home perfectly satiated. I didn't develop a disdain for fast food until I was in high school, when I started to be concerned about what I was putting in my body. Then in quick succession I learned the facts from "Fast Food Nation" and watched Super Size Me, and I knew my days of fast food joy are done. I don't pretend that they weren't glorious and very tasty, but I could no longer condone with my money the practices of mass cattle slaughter and revolting living

conditions, could no longer agree to eat food which was so sick and so ill treated before dying, let alone ingest all the chemicals they were pumping their morsels with (I mean, my beloved chicken nuggets were detached from their breading, floating in their crust, and patently not any part of any chicken I've ever seen). Around the same time, my parents and brother jumped on the healthier food band wagon, and we all stopped going to McDonald's en masse. Since then, I have only ever eaten fast food once, at a McDonald's by the side of the highway when our bus from NTI broke down and it was that or no dinner at all. In the morning I regretted it – I felt sick and weighed down. It's definitely an acquired taste, so to speak.

So when I saw Tim Horton dotting the Canadian landscape, I essentially looked through it. I have gotten to a point where I don't take fast food seriously in any context, so I don't even consider it as an eating option.

Until Calgary, when Tommy and his housemates insisted that we had to go to "Timmy Ho's" for an authentic Canadian experience. I'm sure there are branches of the chain in the US but I decided to keep that to myself. We couldn't refuse hosts who had been so gracious in letting us stay two nights, so in the morning of our departure day, Tommy, Brian and I drove over to the local joint.

We got, as commanded, a "double double" – which is double sugar and double cream. That's the way Brian and I both take our coffee anyway, so that was serendipitous. We also, in a bout of New York nostalgia, got an everything bagel with cream cheese, not expecting much. We sat down to eat.

It was great and I'm prepared to admit after the experience that I am occasionally a snob. The coffee was significantly better than anything we'd had in Canada thus far (excluding Vancouver), and was on par with Dunkin' Donuts coffee (for those of you in the northeast who know what that tastes like – better than expected fast food coffee). And, surprise of surprises, the bagel was excellent. I have no idea what kind of preservatives they'd pumped into it, but it was soft and crisp and beautiful. We ordered a second.

Now, don't get me wrong. I have not become a fast food devotee. I still think its an unfortunate development of modern society and is ruining our collective health and appreciation of food. But I will admit that, on occasion, Timmy Ho's is more than adequate.

After our culinary adventure, Tommy headed off to class and we headed over to Olympic Park. I have never been to an Olympic arena before (excluding the Coliseum in LA), and it was totally cool. There is the ski jump high up on a hill, and the bob sled track to the side, ski lifts up and down the sloping field, and an entrance hall with a museum and café. It all seemed rather impressive, and I was worried that we would get in trouble if we tried to explore. Luckily, I was completely wrong. We wandered up along the bob sled track, and found areas

where the fence was completely gone, at one point coming upon stairs that we could climb to get onto the track itself. I know this because I did it, and boy is it cold in there. We kept climbing the deceptively high hill, and arrived at the top. Apparently the whole place is under construction, or was under construction before they gave up, because there are large piles of unearthed dirt, one of which we scaled before careening down the side of a steep man-made hill to the ski jump. We discovered there that not only could we sit unnoticed on one of the many frozen ski lift chairs, we could actually climb up onto the ski jump track. We could have jumped off into the stadium below, which looked sort of post apocalyptic and over grown with weeds. We restrained ourselves, but continued to range over the whole arena, sliding down dirt piles and running over to the half pipe. No one stopped us. No one asked us what we were up to. We were the only people in the park, and there were no guard rails or attendants. It's like Canada expects us to be responsible human beings smart enough not to do something really stupid and dangerous. I thought it was wonderful and sort of liberating – I felt like we owned the park. Plus, I got to really examine the inside of a bob sled track, and I will probably never get to do that again in my life. All in all, a win in my book.

We hopped back in the car, drove back to Rocky's for one last farewell burger, and then headed south towards God's country, as my father has taken to calling it. We drove through the suburbs of Calgary, which spread out in waves and then abruptly ceased, turning into farmland. We drove for a few hours and then we reached the border. The guard at customs didn't seem to trust us as far as she could throw us, and looked like she really wanted to inspect our truck but in the end her laziness won out and she let us go without a fuss. And so, we were in Montana.

I am in love. This state is so incredibly beautiful and I had absolutely no idea. I had heard that Montana is impressive, enormous, with a wide sky and endless prairie, but I didn't know it was magnificent. The mountains surrounding the plains where we entered were huge, sometimes flat-topped and occasionally blue, while the hills closer to the road were strange and random, cliff like and covered in golden grass. It was easily the prettiest drive we've had so far, and that's saying something because we've seen some really amazing countryside.

We paused by the side of the road to cook a meal of sweet potatoes, garlic and green beans, and twilight was darkening out over the peaks which were now far away. As we cooked, we listened to steers moan and coyotes cry all over the endless fields. There were no city lights and only the occasional car, and the wind was picking up as the stars came out. Wow but it was satisfying.

After dinner, we drove on, and came upon my vision of small town America. It was a little place called Choteau, with not a single trapping of modern American sprawl. Even in the dark of nine o'clock, I could tell from the street lamps that

this main street was the main street I had missed in Alaska and all over Canada. We had planned to continue on to Great Falls, but we decided to stop for the night. A local hotel was open, welcoming hunters and quilters, and being neither, we pulled into the parking lot and camped outside. It was so warm we didn't even need our long johns. What a great state.

November 5, 2010 – The Day of Montana Bliss

Oh I love this state!

Never in my life did I ever think that I would proclaim devotion to a big western prairie state, but here it is. I love it here.

We woke up and quickly piled out to explore. We wandered the quaint Main Street, past the coffee shop, the antique store, the trading post clothing store, the combination espresso bar and gun retailer, the real estate office, the library, the movie theater (a real movie theater, not a multiplex, showing three movies, including *The Social Network* on Friday nights for six dollars). We meandered down a side street, past the diner and over to one of the residential roads, wandering along the sidewalk and crunching through the leaves. Clearly it is a heavy hunting community, with hotels and camping sites on the outskirts of town to accommodate the people coming in for elk. There is also, we discovered, a natural history museum at the end of Main Street, specializing in dinosaurs – apparently, Choteau is known as one of the best areas of paleontology in North America. Go figure.

We meandered back around, did a final tour of the Main Street, checked out the county court house (built 1903), and then headed for a coffee and a local paper. The dailies in various towns are easily as wonderful as their unique coffee houses, and Brian tries to get a hold of one everywhere we go. We were in luck – there was the wider county paper and the local Choteau daily, so we read avidly, learning about the school volleyball team and the reactions to the recent election (I can't pretend that my new found favorite state is liberal, but this little area at least seemed slightly more left leaning than your average red state – oh well, nothing's perfect). We sat and read at the window of the café, greeted at one point by a slightly off but exceptionally friendly resident who asked us where we were from and where we were going and wished us a happy stay.

I read my book and Brian devoured both papers. It was the kind of day I've been longing for since we started on this trip – the chance to sit for a time in a place I've never been and just be there, learning their news and drinking their coffee and experiencing their life for a moment before heading on. The breakneck pace we took through Canada was necessary with the oncoming winter, but I am so

relieved to have the leisure to really explore now, to take in a place that I will probably never see again.

After our second cup, we got in the car and drove to Missoula. The city hadn't originally been on the itinerary but I wanted to go for two reasons:

1) My friend Ashley is from there and gave me a couple of excellent suggestions for stuff to do in town 2) While I was working at The Flea, my high school boyfriend and close friend Ollie called me up. We chatted pretty regularly while I was at work, so it wasn't an odd conversation at first. Suddenly he said "OK Lil so I've figured out where I want to live." "Oh cool, where?" "Missoula." A pause as I did some basic geography in my head. "Missoula... Montana?" "Yup." Another pause. "Why?" "It's the second biggest city." "In... Montana?" "Yup." "It's the second biggest city in Montana." "Yup." "And that's why you want to live there." "Yup. I'm gonna live in a canoe." I actually don't remember how we got to the canoe part, but that was definitely part of the conversation. Anyway, I immediately jumped online to find out more about my friend's chosen destination, and it did sound rather comely. Ollie has not yet made it out here, and it seemed a sort of betrayal of our friendship to be so close and not visit.

So off we headed, back into the beautiful countryside dotted with ranches and cattle. At some point we veered right and found ourselves back among the evergreens, as we climbed through the Rockies and over to this western outpost. Eventually we arrived, amid prairies and mountains and trees, and drove to the University.

I've mentioned before that I love college campuses. I think there is no greater past time than seeing where other people study. Even better than that is a quick athletic run around the campus. And as we drove past the pretty campus and into the surrounding streets, all covered with brightly colored fallen leaves, there seemed no better time or place to get out our running shoes and stretch our legs. We ran around the quad, to the Performing Arts Building, around the stadium (Go Griz!), and onto a walking path by a river, over a few pedestrian bridges, and finally coming to a halt by a field where athletes were practicing. We stretched and reveled in the chilly fall weather, then headed back over to the Performing Arts Building to snoop around. As a former drama major and a current theater artist, I feel deeply compelled to explore all new facilities. This is not the first school I have meandered about, walking into the scene shop or onto the stage and pretending I somehow belonged there – I've done it at Humboldt and Cal Poly. This time there were plenty of people in the large scene area, running saws and loading wood, and I just smiled amiably at the people who gave me quizzical looks. "Hi fellow thespians!" my look seemed to imply, but who knows if that's how anyone took it. After staring at the brochure out in the lobby, we left to change and find some food.

We ate on campus, and then left when we realized we needed a code for their internet. And then came the ever-sobering drive through the inevitable sprawl of small city USA, until we finally made it back around to the small downtown close to campus. There we meandered until we found a coffee shop, open mercifully until midnight, and have been camped out ever since. Soon, it's off to truck and a bright new morning in pretty old town Missoula.

November 10, 2010 – The Day of Many Days and Nights, some of which were bad

We made it to Boulder.

But wait... weren't we just in Montana? What happened to beautiful Missoula? Why haven't we been writing our updates like good travelers?

The reason is that we've had a complicated and busy last few days. Brian and I have reached the point in our trip where we've started to question what we're doing and why, if we're doing it right, if we're spending too much money, what we're going to do when this is all over, when we should end it. Living in a truck is a highly stressful endeavor, with very little personal space. Neither Brian nor I need much personal space, but a certain tension arose that led to a variety of conversations, including discussing the option of speeding up and finishing by Christmas. We mulled it over for a couple of days and then decided that we wanted to keep going, to make this work at least through February, and to really embrace it for what it is – occasionally difficult, often cold and uncomfortable, sometimes unfocused. After a series of conversations where we pondered and fretted and feared for our purpose, we remembered that the purpose is to be here, in these places, to experience them, all the while living simply and in a manner which makes us truly appreciate the comfort of our lives. I think an added bonus that we didn't discuss is that it has made both of us appreciate each other more, to turn to the other one for comfort and kindness when feeling down and out. Our relationship has been so strange – when we met, we were inseparable for almost two months, living together in and out of the truck, experiencing a kind of intimacy usually reserved for couples who have known each other for some time. Then we were apart for eleven months, visiting every other week and spending forty-eight hours at a time together before flying back across the country to our respective coasts. And now we are back in the truck, inseparable and together, with no friends or jobs to distract us, with no other companions, driving through the cold country. And while this can be seriously trying at times, it has also completely changed and deepened our understanding of one another. I mean, seriously, if we were close before, we are positively intuitive now. Occasionally Brian will say something completely random and out

of context, in a moment of silence, and it will be the same strange thing that I was thinking about. We actually finish each other sentences. It's kind of weird and wonderful. I often have trouble figuring out how to talk to other people – friends we stay with, coffee baristas – because I'm not used to anyone else's cadence, and it takes me a moment to figure out what they're saying.

The moral of this paragraph is that the trial of wondering if what we're doing is worthwhile was in itself worthwhile because it lifted the burden of pondering, turned it into conversation, and we were able through discussion to remember why we set out on this trip in the first place. And it brought us closer, because we no longer felt alone in feeling afraid.

So that's one thing. Another is that I personally have been struggling to come to terms with the fact that I am occasionally going to run into people who deeply offend me, with off-the-cuff racist comments, deep-seated homophobia or blatant patronizing sexism. I don't really want to go into this too deeply, because I have been really upset and confused by it. More than once on this trip, I have been put in the position of having to listen to statements that belittle and condescend to me or implicate me in their subtle and insidious bigotry, and I have argued back and gotten angry, and then placated because I couldn't make a scene. So I've come to question not only the smug superiority of others, but also of myself. I have felt angry and hurt and also to blame because eventually I couldn't argue any more so I smiled and made nice, because for the first time I wasn't in a position where I could just leave a situation that made me uncomfortable, and I felt ugly for even being there. So that's been weighing pretty heavily on me. And I guess the benefit of these encounters is that I've been forced to understand something unpleasant, both about the world and about myself, and that now I can learn from it, learn how to stand up more, become more cognizant and conscious. But it doesn't change the fact that I feel impotent and small, in every sense of the word.

And finally, Brian and I got into a car crash last night. It was just a little one – no one was hurt, both cars are fine – but it was pretty exciting, with one car careening up onto the lawn, over the chain link fence, and bumping against the side of a house in Cheyenne. The police and the fire department showed up, flashing lights all over this little neighborhood in the Wyoming capital. Neither Brian nor I has ever been in a car accident, and we were both pretty upset. But everything was fine, and the Cheyenne police are incredibly friendly – I mean like really really nice. He called Brian partner at one point, which I thought was a kind gesture since he was clearly shaken up. We don't know what the damage is, but it looks like Brian's insurance will cover it. As far as the Beast Ranger is concerned, it's looking more beastly than ever, with a dent to the front fender. This makes Brian a little nuts but I think makes the car, and by extension us, somewhat bad ass. And now I no longer fear that someone will break in because, really, the car has orange tape on one light.

But it wouldn't be an adventure without a little sadness, a little nostalgia, a little fear, a lot of self-doubt and anger, and some discomfort. That's what makes us grow and think and change. That's what makes us better than who we were before we left. That's why we beast range – or at least, why I do.

November 10, 2010 – The Day of Many Days and Nights, some of which were good

But that's not all! There have also been some beautiful moments:

We rode a carousel!! I have to give credit to Ashley for this wonderful experience. In that lovely town of Missoula, there exists an old-fashioned carousel. Apparently, in the early nineties, this carpenter came to the town council and told them that he had all the many parts to an old carousel house, and that he would be happy to assemble it and hand carve horses for it if the council would promise him that they would give it a home. The officials, for some glorious reason, accepted this proposal, and helped fund it. The project took something like four years, and ended up involving most of the town and many people from surrounding areas, all the way up to Calgary, with different people contributing their own hand-carved horse or hour of man-power. The result is this incredibly unique and beautiful carousel in the heart of downtown Missoula, with these strange and wonderful ponies – ranging from a pink one with books tied to its saddle to a green dragon-horse snaking its way up and down. The plaque outside the carousel says that it was created and funded by the people of Missoula because they believe in making a life as well as a living. This “Carousel for Missoula” (as it is quirkily called) costs \$1.50 to ride, which translates into three tokens, each imprinted with the name of a horse from the carousel. Best of all, like the great carousel in Martha's Vineyard, there are rings which descend from a dragon's mouth, a sort of ammunition clip, and you grab one as you go around, trying to get the brass ring at the end so that you can get a free ride. Brian and I paid our tokens, chose our painted mares, and buckled up. The ride was wonderful, surprisingly fast and exhilarating, and Brian ended up getting the brass ring! (Actually, I should have gotten it – Brian was on the horse right behind me, and it was in the clip when I came around – but I am clearly completely without hand-eye coordination, and missed it). Brian gave the ring to a little boy we'd watched earlier who was too small to reach the clip but valiantly, and some what terrifyingly, lunged for it every time. He was so excited, sort of awed almost, and his father was appropriately doting – saying things like “Wow! Did you get the brass ring?!” to which the boy would sheepishly nod. We left feeling completely satisfied with our time in Missoula. What a wonderful town!

Just to solidify my affection for this small Montanan town, here are few other

great things about Missoula: There are pedestrian walk ways and foot bridges all along the parks surrounding the river. There is a coffee shop attached to a store which sells hand-made candles and tea sets, where the local punks gather to discuss politics while wearing stickers that say “keep Missoula weird.” We had a fantastic, and rather fancy, dinner at The Pearl, the best restaurant in town and possibly Montana (or so Yelp told us). There is a long winding path up to a big capital M up on the hill above the college. And most impressively, the downtown remains vibrant and walkable, despite the encroaching sprawl. Thank you, Missoula, for being awesome. We really appreciated our stay.

We left Missoula and headed to Billings to visit Brian’s friend Jesse, who took us to the site of The Battle of Little Bighorn. I’m no war buff, but that is one powerful place. It’s remarkably well preserved and empty, since it is not only a monument but a park, and standing on Last Stand Hill, you really get a sense of what it must have been like to stare all around you and see nothing but Native Americans coming to kill you. You also get a really poignant understanding that this was one of the last times the Native Americans would defeat the encroaching US, and the incredible bravery it took to fight the military. The field is sprinkled with graves noting where men from both sides fell, and there is an eerie emptiness to the whole scene that lets you really conjure the battle, aided by plaques and drawings along the way. It’s a great park, and I was glad we went.

We also managed to get spectacularly drunk with Jesse while playing beer pong. I don’t actually know if that was a good thing, but it was certainly fun, and I did get to experience the Billings nightlife scene.

I would like to insert here, before we leave Montana for Wyoming, two observations of mine: The first is that I counted over eleven different Montana license plate designs. Seriously. Eleven. How is that even possible? And secondly, Montana is just full of casinos. I don’t know why, exactly, but what I do know is that many of them, shockingly, contain my name, such as “Casino Lil’s” and “Lucky Lil”. I had been jokingly referring to myself as “Montana Lil” to Brian until I saw a casino with that very name. Cool? Sure.

Wyoming was deeply disappointing. Admittedly, we did not venture to Yellowstone because we were nervous about the oncoming weather (and rightly so – we hit serious snow storms heading into Cheyenne, with winds and blowing swirls of ice and every car and truck in a line going about twenty mph). So we were stuck in bland and tedious countryside. At least, for most of the state. There was one bright highlight, when we ended up driving through a canyon. These mountains were unlike anything I had ever seen before – the slopes were rocky towards the river, giving way to vertical inclines, and the peaks were flat above us. There were enormous rocks in the middle of the river that must have fallen from some great height. Across the river, there were train tracks which barreled through mountains in tunnels that had rickety wooden entrances, like out of a

Wile E. Coyote cartoon. Best of all, there were a few lonely houses along the river, stately in their excellent property. If I were going to live in Wyoming, it would unquestionably be in this valley. When we emerged, we came to a dam, and beyond the dam a reservoir, completely out of place in that dry and flat land. I understand that all reservoirs flood previously unwatered land, but I have never seen one that looked so much like the result of a deluge. There were no mountains keeping the water basined, just little hills sticking up in strange places out across the water, the edge indeterminate. It was weird and striking and, apparently, note-worthy.

We raced through Wyoming and after our lesson in driving mishaps, spent the night in Cheyenne. This morning we left and drove into Colorado.

I have to admit, I have been waiting for Colorado. For me, in some way, the adventure hadn't really started until now. I don't know why I've been so excited for this state – it probably has something to do with the fact that I listened to a lot of John Denver growing up and know all the words to “Rocky Mountain High,” among many of his other hits. Whatever the reason, I have been building the state up in my mind as this pinnacle of American adventure, with verdant fields and the astonishing Rocky Range. As we neared the border, it occurred to me that the state couldn't possibly live up to this unfounded image, that parts of it probably looked a lot like Wyoming, or Kansas, or Nebraska. When we crossed the border without fan fare (so fast we couldn't even get a picture of the snow-covered sign!) I knew I better reshape my image.

We rolled into Boulder amid a foggy haze, unable to see anything of the surrounding cliffs or supposedly attractive landscape. We entered into a suburban sprawl, and I sighed in disappointment. We had come to Boulder for two reasons: because I am thinking of applying to a school in town, and because we'd heard it was neat. I gave up on liking any of it, gave up on my Colorado dream, and settled in to suburban nothing while Brian set about making our car street legal using his impressive, and hitherto untapped, mechanical skills. He came back to the car slightly bloody and very pleased, and we drove on to find the public library.

As we passed the college, the haze lifted, the sun came out, and we came upon one of the best public libraries I have ever seen. It is new and modern, sitting beside a river with huge two-story windows on one side. Inside, a small fountain gurgles away under the main spiral stairway, and an attractive statue sits sort of randomly but no less pleasingly at its side. We sat and worked for awhile and then, with my optimism renewed, we headed out into the town.

With the haze lifted, we finally saw the mountains, which cradle the city on the western edge, and the old houses crawling up their sides. We saw the park and river, the attractive bridge, the two-story buildings that make up the downtown,

the walking mall, the stately court building. I was wrong – well I wasn't entirely wrong, I mean there's still sprawl and a hideous shopping center – but Boulder was not defined by its outskirts. What a pretty place. I suddenly had a renewed excitement for my tour tomorrow, my class observations on Friday. I had a thrill, realizing that I could definitely live here for two years, that this was as great a place to live as everyone had been saying that it was.

We found a little coffee shop, got a cup of their excellent coffee, and sat down for some catch up work.

November 11, 2010 – The Day of Reconsideration

Today, I had my first graduate school visit.

It's the first time since the start of this trip that Brian and I have had a schedule, and somewhere we had to be at a given time. I have to admit, I miss it. I've always functioned really well within a structured day, and I miss the responsibilities associated with other people relying on your presence. It shows just how unfettered our lives in the truck have become when a campus tour becomes a personal obligation, but we take what we can get.

Unfortunately, my scheduled campus tour wasn't until 2pm, so it wasn't as though we had a packed day or anything, but it did give us a sense of purpose all morning – we knew we had until 1:30 to explore, so we set off to the Colorado campus. The school is surprisingly beautiful, perched up on a hill and tucked away in the low mountains surrounding Boulder. The buildings are all brick, and there is a uniformity of architecture that is very pleasing. More than that, the surrounding area is filled with big old houses and tree lined streets, and the whole atmosphere is very picturesque.

We meandered through the college town right outside of the campus, surrounded by pizza joints and bars. As we walked, we passed students headed back to their dorms or frat houses, the whole area abuzz with kids going to and from class. I remember that from Vassar, those few minutes when all the classes would let out and the whole campus would come alive with kids walking briskly in lanes from one building to another, carrying books and bags, looking stressed and busy. It was fun to be a part of it for a moment, to remember what it felt like to have somewhere to go every couple of hours, when the whole purpose of life was to learn and study and grow. It made me yearn to go back to school, and I got increasingly excited about the prospect of graduate school.

As we walked with purpose towards the library, I glanced up and saw a red-

headed kid walking in our directing. He looked vaguely familiar, but as he didn't acknowledge us at all, I didn't think much about it. As he walked past us, Brian turned all the way around, staring at him. He flipped back to me and in a confidential whisper said "That's the ginger kid..."

The ginger kid is this guy from youtube who rants about the bigotry against red headed people, and his anger at South Park. My friend Alex introduced me to his videos – they're strange and funny in a sort of car wreck kind of way. Mostly, its the way he goes from yelling to contemplations about his anger issues and the persecution he faces at his southern high school. He's been parodied on "South Park," he's been watched by people all over the country. It's uncomfortable and awful and great, in the way that a lot of confessional videos are, and you feel sort of sorry for him and also completely engrossed in his weirdness. Brian, who is much more of a skeptic than I am, has been convinced from the beginning that it's a hoax, like lonelygirl. Alex and I argue that no, there are really strange clueless people in the world who could do this, and Brian agrees, but has always thought that it's just a little too perfect, a little too amusing.

And here we were in the mountains of Colorado, and the kid who passed us might have been the ginger kid. I didn't get a good enough look at his face to know for sure, but I think Brian was right, which would make the whole thing a hoax and the kid, an actor. What I thought was so interesting about the encounter, regardless of whether it was the guy or not, was how Brian and I reacted to the possibility that we just solved an internet mystery, that we maybe just saw a nameless internet celebrity. Youtube is so strange – it can make anonymous individuals into super stars and people don't even know who they are, where they live, what they do, or if they're for real or not. I may have seen the ginger kid, may have debunked his whole . Or I may not have. But it was pretty exciting either way.

After that daily dose of adrenalin, we headed into the library and read for an hour or so, and then wandered down to Naropa for my tour. I've been eager to see Naropa, because it is the one school I'm applying to that encourages a visit, and the only one that I'm not entirely sure about. It's a Buddhist institution, and I'm not Buddhist. The MFA program is a general contemporary theater degree, and I'm sure that I want to go for directing. I was drawn to the school because the theater program is very physical, grounded in Viewpoints and Grotowski, and I have been a proponent of physical training since my time at NTI. But I remained unsure about the program, and I hoped that this tour, and the classes I was supposed to sit in on the following day, would help me decide if I wanted to go or not.

The tour was more than helpful, it was decisive. I could tell that immediately, from the way that everyone was careful to qualify every aspect of the school as "super" or "awesome." I could tell from the unconventional offerings for

undergraduate degrees. I could tell from the writing in the magazines and the one room library. I do not belong at Naropa.

Please don't get me wrong; I think schools that cater to the untraditional, schools that serve students who function better in a less conventional learning environment, are necessary and wonderful. Not everyone learns the same way, and the assumption that everyone belongs in an environment that promotes worldly ambition and professional success is highly detrimental to our society. And Naropa is clearly nurturing and caring, promoting a way of learning that suits the slightly crunchier among us. I think that's great.

Here's the thing: I'm not that crunchy. I am, by all standards, on the far left of the spectrum politically; I am a feminist who doesn't shave her legs; I don't agree with capitalism; I'm living out of my truck; I am, by all accounts, crunchier than the average joe. But I also function extremely well in traditional learning environments. I mean, I graduated from Brearley and Vassar – I'm clearly an academic on some level. I like pressure, I like structure, I like being told how to do things, what's right and wrong, good and bad, how to get better. I grew up in New York – I am, on some level, a fan of competition. And it became clear to me that Naropa is not a competitive place. Again, that's great. But not for me.

It was something of a relief, actually. I've been sort of overwhelmed by the prospect of graduate school, intimidated by applications, and feeling nervous about my future path. And I realized, while taking the tour and learning about Japanese flower arrangement class, that if I can't go to a school that I really want to go to, I'd be better off staying in New York and continuing to work until I can get in. It makes me feel a little less desperate, a little more content with the very real prospect that I won't be accepted this year. So, as the tour finished, when Brian and I sat outside discussing the experience and he said "I don't think you belong here" I just nodded and smiled and said "nope." I still had a meeting with an admissions counselor, and a couple of classes to attend the next day, and I was looking forward to seeing more of the program, but I knew with a certainty that I hadn't felt in a long time that I would not be applying to Naropa.

So I had my admissions meeting, was polite, and told them quite honestly that I really appreciated the fact that they insist on a campus visit before applying – Naropa is just too unique to apply on a whim, and that's probably what I would have done if I didn't have to come check it out. I thanked her for the tour and the conversation, then went to a coffee shop and spent the rest of the afternoon working on my other applications.

That night, we grabbed a slice of pizza for dinner at the joint right by the campus, surrounded by college kids getting ready for their night out. I'll be ready to join them again, just not here.

November 12, 2010 – The Day of Continuing On

My day was full, and started early, and this made me excited for the future.

I sat in on two classes at the Arts School at Naropa, starting at 9am. I was supposed to get there ten minutes early, but managed to arrive at 8:58, which infuriated me. I'm not a tardy person, and this uncharacteristic lateness made me eager to get back into a scheduled environment again so I can start being the disciplined person I know I can be. The classes were interesting, with discussions about bones and compression and organs, and a little viewpointing, and it confirmed my previous conclusion that I will not be applying – the program is neat, but it's not what I'm looking for. That said, I think the care that Naropa takes of its applicants is really admirable. I got to meet with the head of the program, who was incredibly friendly and answered my questions and listened to my weird tangents about John Denver. He gave me the address of a show in Denver that evening by a company of alums, and I left feeling like I really wished I could be the kind of artist who would benefit from Naropa while being completely sure that I am not.

Brian was waiting for me out in the parking lot, with the tailgate down and the stove set up. One of the hardest parts of urban camping is how much stealth is involved, and cooking can be a real problem in any city environment. So I was excited that we had found a semi-isolated spot, surrounded by people who most assuredly did not care if we lived out of our truck or not, and made some lentil soup. Organic department of Safeway has the best soup ever.

Afterwards, we grabbed some coffee and headed for Denver. Brian was really eager to get there – I was sort of excited but had tempered my anticipation by reminding myself that medium sized cities in the US tend to suck. The metropolises of the northwest coast being the exceptions, this country has done a really shitty job maintaining and developing its small and medium sized cities. I was sure that Denver would be no exception. We were probably in for a double disappointment because Boulder had been a really rather nice place, with its beautiful public library and pretty landscaping, its parks and bustling pedestrian streets. Denver was bound to suck even more by comparison.

I was right. We didn't even bother to stay. The streets were empty, the buildings run down, the sprawl immense. The city is cut in pieces by enormous freeways, and the surface neighborhoods suffer because of it. We tried to find places to park and walk around, but everything seemed sort of depressing and sketchy, even for the beast ranger. After an hour of wondering if we really wanted to bother with Denver any longer, we opted out and headed south towards New Mexico.

I was hoping for something better in Colorado Springs but it was more of the same and worse, so we didn't stop there either. We ended up in Pueblo, which is probably the worst of them all, parked in a Walmart. It occurred to me that part of the reason sprawl exists in such unbelievable acreage in the midwest is the fact that there is just endless space for it to take up. Not that there isn't sprawl in the northeast, but there isn't nearly as much room for corporations to screw up. The towns are older, more centralized, so the strips that plague small towns and cities all over the country have to be smaller there because there just isn't enough space for five Walmarts and three McDonalds. New York City solves that problem by ousting small businesses in favor of Starbucks and innumerable cell phone stores, scarring old fashioned store fronts with the same stores you could find in any other part of the country, or putting up hideous malls in the middle of Brooklyn and Queens, slowly taking over every part of a once unique city. But my realization stands – there just isn't as much room in the northeast for suburban sprawl, and for that I am deeply grateful. I pondered the sad state of the midwest, and resolved to be a little more positive, since there is absolutely nothing I can personally do about it. So, I fell asleep, and dreaded the harsh morning light.

November 13, 2010 – The Day of Enchantment

Pueblo did not disappoint – it was as hideous in the daytime as it seemed to be at night.

We woke up, used Walmart for its bathroom, and then took off down the highway. I hate freeways, and I hate that we've been taking them through Colorado, and so we veered towards the bottom, off onto a scenic route that took us through desert plains, as we headed west and south towards New Mexico.

I can't really express how desperately I've been craving Mexican food. I never ate it growing up because all the options in my neighborhood sucked. I thought I hated Mexican food until I moved to San Francisco and had my first burrito in the Mission, and realized I had been completely missing out. I ate at least three burritos every week the whole time I lived in SF, and when I got home I started fantasizing about them. It was a year before I came back to California, and the very first thing I did when I got back was have a burrito. This year, every visit I made to LA started with tacos from the taco truck on PCH. So I really haven't gone more than a month all year without some Mexican fix. Needless to say, I was excited. Brian was nigh on feverish. He kept asking what I wanted to do when we got to Taos, with a crazy look in his eyes that said "please say eat. please." I eventually asked him what he wanted to do, and he pretended to think it over and then said "Oh, umm.... I think we should probably eat something."

So, there was a tense anticipation in the car as we drove towards the mountains that cradle Taos. We paused to stare into the enormous gorge and the Rio Grande far below, but quickly abandoned nature for that spicy goodness in the heart of civilization. We went to a place on the outskirts of town called Guadalajara, which happens to be the name of my favorite place in SF as well. New Mexico is apparently known for its Rellenos, a spicy stuffed pepper, so we got one to share and a couple of burritos. Oh my goodness, heaven. We were so happy and full and content. Brian was like a satisfied addict, and that crazy glare was gone from his eyes, which was definitely a good thing.

Our veins pumping with red and green sauce, we headed off to explore Taos. It's tiny, and filled with art galleries. The paintings are not so hot – sort of touristy sunset junk (I may be biased with a painter mother), but the rugs and tapestries and ceramics are really beautiful, and it was nice to see a whole lot of independent shops. We grabbed some coffee from a highly rated coffee shop, filled with the kind of stickers I can get behind. Think: It's Patriotic. Corporate Criminality. Corporations Are Not We The People. Resist Mediocrity. And it wasn't just their signs that rocked – their coffee was pretty awesome. I had a Mocha Mexicana, which was recommended by the good people of Yelp, and it was fantastic.

Let me just take a moment to thank Yelp – it has been the biggest aide on our journey so far. Of all the great good on the internet, Yelp has to be the most amazing, useful tool I've come across. I started using Yelp when I moved to SF, and have not stopped since. As we find ourselves in little towns and cities across the country, Yelp has helped us navigate our way to the best coffee shops, free wifi, and decent local food that each place has to offer. Brian and I have finally started an account so we can contribute our increasing knowledge of American locales, and give back to the online community that has helped us in our times of lonely need.

We continued meandering around town, going through pedestrian squares and into an empty gallery section near the university. The twilight in New Mexico is stunning – a sort of bright yellow glow over the mountains, and we took it in over the adobe homes. It was all very lovely and quaint. We checked the weather for the evening and discovered, to our dismay, that it was going to be eight degrees. Nervous about that kind of freezing temperature (I mean, that's colder than Fairbanks, and we opted for a hotel there). So we researched hotels and found an incredibly cheap one outside of town. I was expecting some awful Motel Six affair, but it was really lovely – turquoise doors and mirrors, one warm orange-y wall, some kind of geometric pattern in bright colors on the bed – very New Mexico, I thought, at least for a motel on the outskirts of Taos.

We took a really hot bath, finished Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (“Morons. I've got morons on my team.”) and headed off to bed, warm against

the cold desert night.

November 14, 2010 – The Day of Lost Days

The biggest problem of a life sans schedule is that we sleep far too much. In the months before we left, I had this idealized vision of our behavior on this trip, imagining us using this time to better ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I saw us waking up at the crack of dawn every day, going for a run, doing sit ups and pushups, decreasing our toxin intake, reading a lot, and generally becoming the ultimate versions of ourselves. Of course, nothing of the sort has happened. We've both been eating less and losing weight, but we haven't exactly been building muscle in its stead. We continue to drink coffee every day, and we haven't been doing nearly enough exercise to offset our endless hours of sitting. But the sleeping really takes the cake. Brian and I have been sleeping at least nine and a half hours every night. This can't possibly be healthy. It's disconcerting for both of us because we are both morning people (or, at least, we used to be) and I for one miss my mornings a lot. But I can't tell you how hard it is to wake up when you have nowhere to be and nothing pressing that needs to get done. It's also really hard to convince yourself to wake up when you know that as soon as you do, you'll have to crawl out of your sleeping bag, sit up without banging your head, wipe yourself down with a baby wipe, hurriedly put on some clothes in the freezing cold, and crawl through a tiny hole into the cab, all before you can get to a bathroom. It's a lot easier to just stay in bed.

It might be even harder to get up when we're in a hotel. It's just so warm, so easy to get up and go to the bathroom and get back in bed. Plus, Brian and I aren't separated by sleeping bags and several layers of clothes in our desperate attempt to keep warm, so the desire to just keep lying in bed entwined is almost unimaginable. This is no excuse, of course. Brian and I have to work on our sleeping habits, but I have a feeling that with limited requirements every day, it won't get much better until we have set schedules once more.

Eventually we did get up, and showered once more. I had been hoping to run, but of course we got up too late for any such activity. I feigned sadness, but really I was relieved – who knows what kind of running shape I'm in after all this sitting. We checked out of our pretty motel room, we headed to the one coffee shop with seating and free wifi in Santa Fe. We figured that since we were sort of on the outskirts of town, we'd have a nice little hike into town. Unfortunately, as we strode out of the parking lot, we glanced up and noticed a big sign for the very coffee shop we were searching for, just across the highway. I was pretty disappointed, but I was heartened by two facts:

- 1) the coffee shop is also a movie store, so if you get restless you can browse

movie titles, and 2) the shop is owned by a former New Yorker, and they have H&H bagels flown in! If you've never had a real New York bagel, then you have no idea what you are missing – a serious bagel is a beautiful thing, and once you've had it, nothing else even comes close. Even Brian, who has pegged me as a snob about most things having to do with New York (bagels, pizza, hot dogs, the fact that it's New York), was thrilled to find real bagels in the desert.

The ambiance was a little weird, and they played theme songs from movies, which was cute but got pretty old. The coffee was decent, and they didn't kick us out, so we hung out there until five or so, working, catching up on beastranger.

At five, stiff from the constant lack of exercise, we left and decided to take what remained of the desert daylight to explore. We wandered up the highway, and meandered into little neighborhoods, were terrified by a ferocious dog that nearly jumped out of its fenced yard, and headed into pretty historic Taos.

The late afternoon light in New Mexico is really stunning. I understood why visual artists flock to this state – its just so bright and clear, and in the evening, the light turns orange and pink with startling depth. Taos is surrounded by these rolling hill-mountains, and they turn shadowy in the fading light. The pueblo buildings in the historic parts of town fit perfectly with the surrounding landscape, and forms an unbroken scenic image. I found myself loving New Mexico, being drawn to the startling and unapologetic beauty.

We headed back to the car through a winding neighborhood, and urban cooked in the front seat. After the soup course, we had our nutella course while competing at Scrabble on Brian's phone. I hate to admit it, but I am as competitive as my mother and a sorer loser – I hate hate hate losing, especially at word games. Brian is a million times better at Scrabble than I am, and he beat me easily by over a hundred points. I made a mental note to stop playing him at games that I suck at, and we went to sleep.

November 15, 2010 – The Day of Paying Attention

What a glorious day, and what a strange evening!

We started our day at a local coffee shop, which was packed with locals. No one seems to actually work in Taos, or at least, their work doesn't start in the morning, because the whole place was abuzz with artists and performers, shooting the shit and having a grand old time. Brian and I opted to sit outside, and went with our books to the stoop facing the main street. We read for an hour or so, moving to the benches when they were vacated, and generally enjoying the

morning, which had gone from truly cold to sunny and warm. We were no longer wearing coats, and even took off our sweatshirts, sitting in t-shirts in the hot sun. I'm in the midst of Gail Collins' book "American Women" which is a monster but really interesting, and I kept bothering Brian by reading little snippets of text to him about the general oppression of the female sex.

As we sat reading and staring into the street, an old man came and sat next to me on the bench, with a cane and a muffin. He sat slowly, propped his cane, and immediately asked what I was reading. I showed him the cover of the book, and told him that it was about the history of women in this country from 1600 to the present. I made a slight feminist statement, and he countered by saying "I know. I don't understand why people are so cruel to women – they're so beautiful" and I thought "awesome" and closed my book.

We talked for the next hour or so, sitting on that bench in the hot sun. I asked him where he was from (Boston), how old he was (90) and how he got to Taos, which prompted him on a retelling of his life story. In the next forty minutes he got about as far as the Korean War, before I jumped back in. He's a painter, who claims to have painted the princess of Liechtenstein, as well as various other celebrities. He talked about the women in his life, and all the sons he's had with various ladies, none of whom he seems to have married. He was wearing a pin with a peace sign on it and various religious symbols, and one on his cap of a similar liberal persuasion. He had lived in New York for a time, studied at the art students league, told us about his teacher who used to say "Michelangelo is marvelous! And Rubens! Rubens! Rubens!"

We told him we were living out of our truck and driving around the country, and he smiled and said "You know, I'm beginning to like you two." He told me I was beautiful, told Brian he was handsome. He told us his cane was an old fashioned carnival cane – the kind used to demonstrate various attractions while yelling "step right up!"

He told us he had recently been on a long journey around the country, that he prefers gin to either beer or wine, and that there's nothing like a good smoke on a nice day (he was smoking this whole time). He looked every day of ninety, and yet he looked healthy. He was also completely sane – an old man with a captive audience, sure, but sane and smart and funny and clearly active. He told us he had recently been adopted into a local Native American family, and that the kid he thought of as a grandson frequently got into bar fights when they went out together. He lived by himself in town, and was just hanging out eating his muffin and talking to everyone he met. I loved him – I loved him for his wit and story telling, for his sweeping statements about famous people he'd never met ("I never met her, but she was a nice lady, very kind" or "Prince Charles is a nice man, but he doesn't really want anything to do with the government"), and mostly for the fact that he sat himself down and started chatting with us. He told

us he called one of his former lovers “The Great Dane” because she was Danish and imposing, and another one “Roast Beef” because she roasted meats and also was somewhat imposing.

And I loved what he made me realize – that growing old does not necessarily mean getting complacent, that growing old really is a state of mind. He was ninety, and lively and living alone. I understand that this is lucky, that many people are affected with senility or require health assistance, but I also think a great many people (especially in this culture) just let themselves go, give up, and wait for death. This man could have dropped dead at any instant, but he was living his life in the mean time. As he ate his muffin, he smiled at us and said “I love to eat” and we laughed and said that we did too. He was not bitter – at least, he didn’t spew bile in our direction. He was kind and courteous and full of stories and information. And we had a lovely morning with him. And I want to grow old just like that, at a coffee shop with vibrant people, chatting it up.

We said our goodbyes, and wandered around town one more time, before heading out of town. Before we left the area for Santa Fe, we headed to the Taos Pueblo. I had no idea what to expect, just that it seemed to be a landmark. We payed our twenty bucks and went in the gates.

And what a landmark it is! It’s the oldest occupied town in the country, or at least one of them. Two of the buildings are over 1,000 years old – the multi-storied pueblos constructed by the Native Americans, discovered by the conquistadors, and now a national historic site. People live there, work there, depend on tourism and curiosity, selling jewelry and rugs and food. We were lured into one house by an excellent saleswoman who gave us fried flat bread with honey and then charged us five dollars. While she cooked, we found out she had been born in the town, went to Kansas to major in Native American studies, and then returned home to the pueblo to live and work. We thanked her, left her home and wandered in the dusty street amid the loose dogs. The structures are amazing, and feel as ancient as they are, standing at the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. There is no electricity or running water in the village, and most people still use the outdoor clay stoves. The main difference between now and a millennium ago is the fact that the apartments have doors now, there are some wood burning stoves installed in the homes, and the church, which was built in 1850. Apparently the conquistadors had built a church in the early 1600s, but that was burned down by Spanish settlers in retaliation for the murder of their governor, killing all the Native Americans who were hiding inside. That spot is now a graveyard, appropriately enough, and the new church stands at the entrance to town. We meandered inside, and the windows, painted blue, let in a modicum of light with the candles burning over head, so the whole atmosphere felt heavy and powerful. The walls of the adobes are thick and strong, and the church is no soaring European gothic with arches that make you want to sing, but weighty and deep, with wooden beams stretching across a low

ceiling, a structure that makes you want to fall to your knees and pray for hours. It's a beautiful church.

There is a large part of the village that is cut off from visitors, the part where holy rituals take place. According to our little informational pamphlet, there is a lake – the Blue Lake – that the US government took from the Pueblo Indians in the early 20th century but then returned in 1970 in recognition of its importance to the people. Now no one can go there except the Native Americans who protect it, and I think that's as it should be. The town is small, only 150 people can live there, and so there wasn't much to do other than walk in a circle and then head out. As we were leaving, the increasingly dark skies opened and it began to snow. This was not flakey snow that coats the earth in dust, this was like hail, big balls of white frozen water, and they followed us as we drove out of town.

Eventually we passed the storm, and drove along the Rio Grande to Santa Fe. How cool is it that the Rio Grande starts all the way up here? I had no idea – shows how well geography is taught in school. It was a beautiful drive, and I was eager to get into Santa Fe. I had been there once before with an ex of mine, while he was working on a show. We had stayed there a couple of nights, and then we drove the long way back to San Francisco, and that was my first introduction to the American southwest, and the desert landscape. I thought Santa Fe was neat, and I was excited to re-explore it with someone I like a whole lot more. The main memory I had of the city was how tiny it was, how compact and sort of quaint. I remembered climbing to the top of a hill and surveying the whole town, and thinking “this is a capital?” So as we drove in, I was surprised at how much bigger it felt, how much more it seemed to sprawl. Perhaps I wasn't paying attention, or perhaps I was just in a different frame of mind, but I had recalled the city stopping abruptly and then nothing but desert past that. Apparently I was wrong. We drove into the city, by way of the northern highway, under bridges painted with various murals. It wasn't like I remembered, but it was still awesome. I love that Santa Fe personalizes its highway overpasses.

We got into town and did the first thing we always do in a new place: laundry. As we were doing laundry, the magnificent day took a left turn into awful. I decided it was time to budget, which always makes me really tense and frustrated. I have budgeted for years, but never with a spreadsheet, and I find the process really unnerving, like self-flagellation with Excel as your whip. I hate it. And it always provokes a fight, because Brian hates it too, and we both end up feeling guilty once we've tallied up our spending.

The tension over spreadsheets led to a fight which led to a long conversation about why we're doing this trip. This is the problem with doing something sort of outside the realm of normal daily expectations – there is always that nagging feeling that you're doing something wrong, something that is not worthwhile, something that is ultimately pointless and a waste of time. Usually we don't feel

that way, but when that particular monster sneaks up on us, we end up in long discussions about whether this trip is doing what we thought it would do, do we even know what we thought it would do, what is the point, etc etc. Brian was feeling stifled by the budget, I was feeling frustrated that we weren't being more Spartan in our approach to food. Brian was feeling like ending the trip, I was feeling like I wanted to keep going.

In the end, we resolved the issue, and came to an agreement. We have been planning for this trip for a year, we have been saving and putting money away so that we can have this once-in-a-lifetime experience, and that maybe we are being too hard on ourselves in terms of money. I tend to get pretty militant when I get an idea into my head, and it becomes hard for me to change my mind, but I agreed that if this trip was going to continue, we couldn't keep feeling bad every time we bought a cup of coffee, or stayed in a hotel because it was just too damn cold. I need to be a little less rigid in my expectations, and Brian needs to be a little more open to the fact that sometimes living in a truck sucks – its cold and uncomfortable and sleeping with a hat on is seriously annoying.

It brought up the final question of course of what are we doing (a theme, I realize, of the last few weeks), a question that was expected but is never easy. And I guess my revised version of what we're doing is this:

We are seeing our country We are living together in our own space after a year of long distance We are transitioning together as Brian moves across the country We are taking time out from our normal lives to do something we have both wanted to do for a long time We are learning to appreciate the comforts we have come to take for granted

In that, I am learning that we do not have to live off of granola in order to make this trip meaningful. If we are in New Mexico, fuck it, we should eat some Mexican food! If we are in Texas, then barbecue it is. If we are in New Orleans, I'll be damned if we don't have a beignet. Part of seeing the country is eating the food. We don't have to be decadent, but we also don't have to live off of canned soup, like I had been thinking we would. It is OK – we have saved up enough money for this trip, and we should use it for this trip. And I have to be ready to go back to New York when it is time to go back to New York. This does not have to be a great spiritual journey – hoping for that is setting myself up for failure and disappointment. This is a road trip, a long and particular road trip, where we see the country in the most intimate way we can. It is a long move for Brian and a way for me to share with him the difficulty of the transition, so that he does not feel alone when we move back to New York.

In the end, the fight led to a greater understanding of purpose and of each other. Which is one of the many reasons I love Brian – because we always end up closer and more in tune, because we know how to talk. And we went to sleep with a

greater sense of purpose than we've had in a long time, and a renewed excitement for this trip, whatever the end result may be.

November 16, 2010 – The Day of the City Different

Oh Santa Fe, I dig you.

We went to sleep in snow and woke up to a warm day. We immediately went to have a hearty New Mexican breakfast at a local diner-y type place, where I had blue corn pancakes and Brian had a breakfast burrito. It was delicious and heavy and we were so full that we decided to take a nap, something I really don't like doing because we sleep so much anyway, but it was totally worth it. We awoke in the back of our truck to the bright afternoon sun and, still full but not stuffed, we headed into town.

Santa Fe was beginning to look more like I remembered it – I realized that I had stayed in the very center of town the last time, and didn't really get a sense of its scale. It's still small, and feels sort of sleepy, but is beautiful and very uniform architecturally – not in a stifling way, just in that the city seems to get what looks good and sticks with it. We headed straight for the church.

I am a big, big fan of churches. I grew up revering them, partially because I never attended them and so have no negative connotations, and partially because my father, a die-hard atheist, instilled in me an appreciation for their history and architecture, the profound feeling of standing in a place of huge potential and powerful emotions and staring skyward, aware of the incredible inspiration that fueled their creation. I grew up visiting Catholic and Anglican churches (you know, the really beautiful ones) in Europe whenever I was there on vacation. My father would bundle us up in the rental car, and off we would head into the small towns of France or England, in search of the beautiful temples. I even had the incredible good fortune to be a member of the Brearley chorus and orchestra during their trip to southern England and Wales, when we were invited to sing and play in Salisbury Cathedral. Playing cello alongside a complete student orchestra while young female voices sang Stabat Mater was one of the cooler moments in my life. The point is, I know a good church when I see one, and I can appreciate it – albeit in a completely different way than someone who actually believes in anything related to Christianity.

St. Francis Cathedral Basilica is wonderful. It is different from the style of church I grew up visiting, being of Spanish mission influence, but that makes it all the more appealing to me as a religion minor and church aficionado (or so I like to

style myself in my head). The colors are vibrant, and the columns wrapped in red and gold ribbons. The twelve stations of the cross are beautifully illustrated, painted in rich imagery rather than etched into wood. Christ hangs dolefully on the cross, looking appropriately mutilated, and the baptismal font rests in the center of the aisle, bubbling from the holy water basin into the pool beset with wrought iron when not in use. I love beautiful worship sights, love them like I love beautiful theaters or governmental buildings, love them like any stunning space that is full of potential energy. Brian and I wandered around, took it in, met a nice man named Gregory who was clearly a little nuts but perfectly friendly, and then headed back out into the world.

We wandered the streets and decided that, since we had been living in the New Mexican landscape for almost a week now, it would be a crime to pass up the Georgia O'Keefe museum. So we bought our tickets and checked it out. I love O'Keefe, I think some of her paintings are just breathtaking, and I'm a big fan of her juxtaposition of images to invoke an emotional reaction or memory – like the skull and the blue flower on a white background, or the mountain at dusk with a giant blue disc in the sky. I'm biased towards her oil work, I think partially because my mother works in oil and I prefer the intensity of the color to that of watercolor, but I liked her pastels as well. I mean, what I don't know about visual art can (and does) fill many many books, so I don't want to sound like I know what I'm talking about because I don't, but what I can say is that I feel very beautiful looking at her paintings, and having seen the landscape she's trying to represent, I understand the impetus to try to explore the feelings it inspires. If I could paint, I would try to paint like O'Keefe.

We then meandered about until we found a coffee shop. It was only open until six, which was a bummer, but we figured we'd find another one once the first closed. We started Yelping, and came up empty. Nothing. Not a single coffee shop open until 9 or 10. What? Come on Santa Fe, you were doing so well!

Right before we left, a girl sitting near us leaned over and said, "Is your name Lillian?" and I said yes, because, you know, it is, and she replied "I thought you looked familiar. I was at the O'Neill that summer you were there in that play, and I also saw you in a play with Jaffe at Dartmouth." Oh wow. There's actually nothing more flattering as an actor to be recognized, and certainly nothing more incredible than to be recognized halfway across the country. The girl turned out to be Alesandra, who I had met briefly after one of the aforementioned plays. We have a bunch of mutual friends in common, and so we chatted for a bit. She's been out here studying photography but was about to head back east, and her boyfriend was at St. John's program. I personally have a lot of issues with the Great Books Program (two women? seriously?), which we discussed briefly, before launching into topics like why she was in Santa Fe, what she was doing, etc. She voiced the feeling that had been creeping into me all day: that Santa Fe is beautiful and a really great place, but perhaps just a little too laid back. Then,

as the shop closed all around us, I asked if there was anywhere that was still open. “No, I’m afraid not,” she said, “six o’clock is really the latest.” Damn it, Santa Fe, I dig you, but that’s just ridiculous.

I can’t tell you how nice it is to see a friendly face, someone who knows the same people you know, when you’re so far away from home. We said goodbye, and then Brian and I, giving up on Santa Fe’s coffee shops, headed for the library before heading for the bed of the truck.

November 17, 2010 – The Day of Local Santa Fe

The best thing about our new pact to stop fretting over our budget is the great food we get to eat.

There are a few places in this country with truly excellent local food. New York, of course, has its bagels and its pizza, as well as its various cuisines from all around the world (I mean, there are 8 million people there, from all over the globe – we’re pretty set as far as food is concerned). LA has its taco trucks, SF has its burritos, and both places have devotees of the California foodie movement, so there’s no shortage of excellent organic and local places. New Orleans has its gumbo and jambalaya and beignets. And of course, the coffee just gets better and better the further northwest you go. So, I am happy to add Santa Fe to my list of “cities with cuisines worthy of my discerning taste buds” list.

I was a terrible eater as a kid, and never went near anything even remotely spicy (we’re talking butter and peanut butter as primary staples). It has taken me most of my adult life to get used to spicy food, but I am glad I took the time because otherwise I would be lost in Santa Fe. The green chili is to die for. Usually it’s chunky and heavy and very very green, with heat that sort of makes you sweat. The food in Santa Fe is excellent, but the chili that garnishes every dish is what you really want to eat.

Today, we sampled the fare of Tia Sophia, a little place near the square that Yelp said was sort of overhyped, but I thought was wonderful (after all, what do I know?). Brian and I had a breakfast burrito and the huevos rancheros. I’m a little biased against breakfast burritos, because I’m so completely in love with the chorizo burrito from Tito’s in Long Beach, but this was pretty good, and the huevos rancheros were wet, which was surprisingly awesome, and the beans were really tasty. I wish I lived in a culture where beans were an acceptable breakfast item. Unfortunately, the northeast isn’t so crazy about them. Oh well.

After that, we walked off our food by meandering over to Aztec Cafe,

recommended to us by the pal of our 90 year old friend in Taos. Brian asked me recently what my top five favorite cafes in the US were, and I got stuck after number 1 and 2 (Philz, obviously, and Revolution – both San Francisco). The rest were pretty tentative. I wasn't expecting much from Aztec, but I was totally surprised – the coffee was excellent, the atmosphere was really cool and relaxed, and the brownies rocked. It totally made my list, and we spent the rest of the afternoon there. After that, we headed over to the little independent bookstore next door, where we bought a couple of books and chatted with the owner. He was a little eccentric, but he won me over when he looked up earnestly from his desk and said “I just don't understand why nobody reads anymore. You go to houses, and there are no books. How can you live like that?” And I completely agree.

We left, and meandered over to the public library, where we camped out for the next couple of hours. I took my shoes off – as I always do in any situation – and was kindly told by a police officer to put them back on. She was really very nice about it, and it made me like Santa Fe even more.

November 18, 2010 – The Day of Revisiting

I came here over two years ago with my ex. I came because he was doing a show at The Lensic Theater, and he invited me to join him so that we could road trip back to San Francisco. We actually stayed at the same hotel where Brian and I have been sleeping – except Spence and I stayed in a room, and Brian and I camp out in the parking lot. It's nice to know that the hotel has such excellent security – we've stayed there every night so far and have no reason to move.

The point of even mentioning my last time here is to say that I had a very different impression of the city that time. I spent the whole time in the main part of the city, around the old square, and didn't get a sense of how large it is. I mean, it's not huge, but I've had it in my head as a small town, no bigger than Oneonta in upstate New York. So imagine my surprise this time to discover that my concept of the city – as some quaint little place in the middle of the desert – is completely off and actually its a decent sized city. At first, I was disappointed, but then I realized that it's actually pretty impressive that a mid-sized city (which, if you've been reading this blog, you know I hate) can manage to maintain its identity while still accepting all those banes of modern life and suburban sprawl. Santa Fe has some really serious zoning laws, and I am very grateful for that. So in the past couple of days, I've been trying to figure out why I had held onto this image of the city as some tiny place, and I realized its because of the Cross of the Martyrs.

In 1985, a red-letter year by all standards, the city held its 375th anniversary

party. To commemorate the event, the city built a winding walkway up to the enormous cross that sits on a hill overlooking the old city, the monument to the Spanish priests who died in a Native American revolt. The walkway has a series of plaques on it which give various pieces of information, ranging from the informative to the slightly random. Two years ago, we hiked this little hill to the top. Spencer was a huge fan of the whole thing because he really digs plaques (“knowledge, baby!”) and I am certainly fond of them as well. But the kicker was the view. You can see the whole city from that hill, or at least a large part of it, and then, even better, the amazing desert and jagged mountains beyond. The landscape is yellow and brown, dotted with little green bushes, and then the Sangre de Cristo are sort of blue and foreign, and yet they seem to cradle the entire scene. It’s really something, and it makes the city seem smaller than it actually is.

I was eager to revisit the site with Brian, both because I wanted to see the city again from that height with a better understanding of its layout, and also because I thought Brian might appreciate it. He did. He likes plaques a lot, too.

After our little adventure, we headed back to Aztec Cafe so we could start to feel like regulars. Then it was off to the AT&T store because Brian, in his infinite confidence, convinced me that he could use his new sim card in his old iphone and the company wouldn’t notice or charge him for it. He was wrong, and I was reminded once again of how persuasive Brian can be when he acts like he knows what he’s talking about. Then, we found a cheaper version of Whole Foods, and then settled down for some wine, bread and cheese in what was quickly becoming our parking spot.

And then, yes, Brian beat me at Scrabble. He’s much better at it than I am. There, I said it.

November 19, 2010 – The Day of Separation

Today, Brian and I spent about two hours apart.

Writing this now, it sounds totally pathetic and sort of bizarre. I mean, two hours? That’s really not that big a deal. But you have to understand that Brian and I have actually been inseparable for months. I think the longest we’ve spent outside of a two foot radius is around fifteen minutes. So having the opportunity to wander around alone for awhile was welcome.

We started off the day with lattes and the New York Times (I know, I know, Latte-Drinking New York Times Reading Liberals – some stereotypes are true and frankly, I don’t care). We sat in the park in the square and watched a bunch

of school kids on a field trip fill out a worksheet, some kids on skateboards gliding around the statue, hippies, homeless, and the Native American women hawking their jewelry. It was beautiful. After an hour or so we split up, and I wandered around and had a long and lovely phone conversation with my friend Maggie. I meandered around the square and wound my way around the back streets of the city, sitting in sunny areas and pacing back and forth along the sidewalks. After around two hours, I returned to the truck in time to meet up with Brian and get ready for dinner.

For the first time in a couple of weeks, Brian and I had a dinner date! Now, please don't misunderstand. There is no person on earth I would rather have dinner with every night than Brian. Whether its canned soup or goat cheese and sausage or chicken parmesan, Brian is the only person I want to be next to in the kitchen and the dining room. But every once in a while, it's nice to see other people as well. So, Brian and I were flattered and pleased when Alesandra (the woman who recognized me in the coffee shop the other day) emailed me and asked if we wanted to get dinner with her and her boyfriend. We showed up for the early meal at La Choza and had a really nice meal with them and her friend, who joined us. Enrico, Alesandra's boyfriend, went to the NTI Moscow program, so we had a bunch in common. It is really nice to have dinner with people who we are connected to in one way or another, especially when we accidentally find them in a completely foreign place.

After dinner, Brian and I headed off to the trusty library, only to discover that it was closed! We wondered where on earth we were going to find a space to do a little work when we stumbled on a gelato shop open until 10pm. Joy was felt, desert was consumed, internet was used, and we went to sleep in the back of our truck.

November 20, 2010 – The Day of the City Awesome

I love farmers markets.

You can tell a good city by the quality and quantity of its farmers markets. I became intimately acquainted with the Union Square farmer's market in NYC this past year because my pal Ollie sold pickles there every Wednesday and Saturday. That's a great market.

Santa Fe's is better.

We woke up from a peaceful slumber in our parking lot spot, and headed down the street to the covered market. Our friends from dinner the night before told us

about it, and when we go there, we became instantly grateful for the information.

The market is alive. Everyone is crammed into this one room building, so the whole place is extremely sensual – smells and shouts, people hawking their wares, bright light from the windows and colors of all the different fruits and vegetables. In the back corner, an old woman and man were playing their banjo and standing bass, singing. Vendors were cooking, shoppers carried enormous tote bags of fresh produce from one stand to another. And the free samples – a sign of excellence. Brian and I did a round of all the stands, trying honey and cheese and pasta and tomatoes. We meandered outside and found people roasting peppers over a giant spit, more dancing and singing, coffee and strangely shaped carrots.

In the end, we bought a bright yellow heirloom tomato and some fresh goat cheese for dinner, plus apple cider and two breakfast burritos made with gouda cheese and spicy green chili for right then. The day was bright and warm, and we sat outside eating and people watching. There was a man sharpening knives at the market entrance, and he was making jokes with everyone who came to chat. His buddy came up to him at one point and said “Oh you’re so lucky you can grow a beard. I can only do this goatee” to which our lively sharpener replied “Well, you’re part Indian, right. Apache? A patch-y here? A patch-y there?!” And then he laughed heartily. A punster! I love it.

We left, and wandered back to the car, and then headed over to Aztec. On the way I called my family, who had convened in upstate New York. There have been many times over the past few years when I have been off elsewhere – San Francisco or LA or various other places – living my adult life, and my family has journeyed to our farm upstate without me and I get surprisingly home sick. So I called, and had a long chat sitting out in the sun, glad to be in Santa Fe and yet wishing I were sitting in the library with my dad or hanging out with my mother in her studio, watching a movie with my bro in the basement, getting ready for wine and cheese and a fire in the evening.

Eventually, I got off the phone and headed into Aztec, but not before witnessing an incredibly drugged out guy walk up and down the street next to me over and over again. He had clearly completely exited reality, and he wasn’t doing anything outlandish, but he was slightly terrifying in the way he kept pacing slowly and staring directly at me or at whoever happened to be in front of him. There is something really freaky about encountering someone who is on those kind of really serious drugs – you realize how deeply important social rules are, that they keep you safe, keep other people from doing scary and unpredictable things. If you’re not hanging out in this reality, who knows what you might do. Brian told me that he came in to the room in Aztec where Brian was sitting alone and just stared at him for a good couple of minutes before leaving. Eventually he passed down the street and out of sight, always staring directly ahead of him, at

and through whatever happened to be there.

After that non sequitur, Brian and I hung out and worked for awhile until Aztec closed at the absurd hour of 5pm (really, Santa Fe – I love you and your farmer's markets, but I can't get over your ridiculously lacking night life). Since the library would soon close and we still had work to do, we decided to bunk up in a hotel and continue there. We found a little motel outside the old city, extremely cheap, with a specific theme to each room. We stayed in the Buffalo Girls room, which had a little plaque to all those ladies who came out west with the men, whom history seems to have forgotten. It said something about life being hell, and I was totally won over. The walls were crazy thin, and we listened to our neighbors have a flirty conversation for awhile, but on the whole it was another nice, unique New Mexico motel. We ate our tomato and all of the goat cheese, drank some wine, and after our work, we watched some random movie before conking out. It was our last night in Santa Fe, and I can't think of any better way to spend it.

November 21, 2010 – The Day of Finally Leaving Santa Fe

We started this Sunday as we start many of our best Sundays – with the Sunday New York Times Crossword.

I am convinced that the way we survived a year of long distance was our commitment to Will Shortz and his amazing crosswords. It was something to do every day, a way to hang out and not have to constantly talk. It was like being in the same room doing an activity. It helped a lot. And the best of all was the Sunday. To me, Sunday is the New York Times. I don't mean to be a walking infomercial for them, but I grew up with the Times, and every Sunday, my father would head out to the street news stand and pick up two enormous Sunday editions. He only got two because of the crossword in the magazine – my parents both like doing it, and my father is faster than my mother so they can't do it together. So every Sunday, there was coffee and crosswords and numerous sections of the Times spread out on my parents bed. It's very evocative for me, and I'm glad that I get to share this familial tradition with Brian.

So, as I said, this Sunday started out with some free (and terrible) coffee from our hotel abode, and sat with the Times crossword until we had finished the whole thing. Then we hurriedly got clean and dressed and checked out. We had the chance to dry out our soggy sheets, which was really nice (it gets pretty damp back there) and to rearrange our stuff, which always makes me feel fresh and pleased. We headed back to Aztec for one last cup of coffee, and while we were

there, we planned our escape.

I don't know why it's been so hard to leave Santa Fe. I mean, it's not my favorite city in the country, and everything closes early. But I do really like it. I love the vibe, the laid back nature of all the people on the street, I love the architecture and the food and the surrounding environment. I have felt content in Santa Fe, at ease. I really like it here. But I have also been feeling restless, as one must when one inhabits a moving vehicle. I have been eager to get going, but unsure of where we should head next.

For most of our trip, we have been trying to outrun the cold. Get to Alaska! Get out of Canada! Get to New Mexico! And now that we've succeeded, we sort of found ourselves at a loss. With no freezing weather pushing us any more, we haven't had any impetus to move. And Santa Fe is so lovely, such a destination, that its unclear where to head after it. The next big place we're headed is New Orleans, where my Vassar friends and Andrew live, and I can't wait to get there, but we are also eager to wwoof and haven't found a place yet. So we're in a little bit of limbo.

So we sat in Aztec Cafe, knowing that we were not going to be spending the night in Santa Fe, and trying to figure out where to go. The most logical conclusion was Austin, and on our way trying to solidify a wwoofing option somewhere near by. So we mapped out the remainder of New Mexico and, with a fond farewell, headed out of that lovely city.

And drove into some seriously barren landscape. Not right away – at first it was all mountains and pretty colored desert. But soon it was dark and flat and we began to miss our week-long home. We drove through nothing, through emptiness, until we hit a tiny town at the intersection of two state highways. We parked in the near-deserted parking lot of a random motel and went to the run down gas station, being nearly blown off our feet on the way. We climbed in the back and realized that, for the first time, it was warm enough to sleep without our trusty long johns. That was nice. The rest was sad. I missed Santa Fe already, and, for really the first time on this trip, was unsure of what the morning would bring.

November 22, 2010 – The Day of Accents and Flatlands

Oh my this has been the most depressing stretch of our journey so far.

Eastern New Mexico and western Texas are awful, at least in my opinion. Flat and yellowing, covered with oil fields pumping away into the barren earth,

cotton fields that look covered in trash, and the red dust from over-planted fields floating in the air at every turn.

The redness of the earth is in fact pretty cool, but the air smells like oil, which is pretty disconcerting, especially when you can't tell if it's your car or the wind that smells like gasoline.

We awoke and drove out of the town, surrounded by a furious gale. You get the sense that it never stops blowing in those parts – it was so strong it practically took off our car door. We drove through desert, past a town that touted itself as the place of Billy the Kid's last retreat. We drove to Roswell, which is as touristy as you think it's going to be, but in a run down, neglected sort of a way, like it used to be popular but has since been forgotten but no one in the town realizes that yet. And spread out – just strip mall. But we did get a great burrito at a place called Fat's Burrito – a little family run joint with the spiciest green chili we have had yet. I mean, so spicy that I, with my northeastern taste buds, was practically in tears. But that didn't stop me from eating it. So damn good.

We drove, and without much fanfare, passed into Texas. We drove, and the earth turned red, and the cotton grew and the oil bloomed. We drove and I was surprised at just how flat the land had become, how unimpressive the houses, how unattractive the whole place was.

We drove until we came to Lubbock, a town without a single aspect to set it apart from anywhere else. All grid and chain stores. But we did manage to find a coffee shop that had a decent brew and free wifi. And before that, we found a Five Guys Burger joint, and split a rather excellent patty of beef.

On our way in, we paused at a gas station, and I went in looking for the bathroom.

“Do you have a bathroom?”

“We sure don't!”

“Oh...”

“We used to have one outside, but then the key got locked in. We can't even get in to get the key out!”

“...oh...”

All this was said with a big old smile spread across the attendant's face, and all with that distinctive Texan twang. I found it rather endearing, actually, that he could turn me down with such friendliness and enthusiasm. And it struck me that this was the first time on our journey that we had heard an accent, something different than our own newscaster flatness. And that was appealing

too. So I decided to stop hating on Texas – sure, I will probably never come back to the west side of this state, but they sure are friendly.

At the coffee shop I called ahead to try to find a hotel in Austin for Thanksgiving. Brian and I figure that if we can't be with our families, we might as well have an oven in which to cook something resembling Thanksgiving dinner. I called a few places, eventually finding one with a kitchenette. Before I reached them, however, I called a place that claimed to have a kitchen with a stove but were not clear about whether there was an oven.

“Hello, this is the X hotel, how may I help you?”

“Oh hello! I was wondering, do you all have ovens in your guest suites?”

“We sure don't!”

“Oh...”

“We have a toaster oven!”

“Oh. Um. But that's not, like, a real oven?”

“No ma'am. You couldn't cook a turkey in it!”

“Oh... Ok. Well, thank you.”

“You are welcome!”

Just so friendly! Not apologetic, not friendly with a sort of a sad smile – enthusiastically friendly, like they were telling me something great. I love that. I really do.

November 23, 2010 – The Day of Coffee and Driving

Not much to report today. Sometimes that just happens.

We awoke in our parking lot and headed off for some chores. We had been lax about our oil, and had long since past the mile mark to get it changed. We were also almost completely out of underwear.

So, we took on our gendered roles, and I went off to do laundry and Brian went to deal with the mechanics. I mean, I could go take the car to get an oil change, and Brian could have taken over the laundry duties – I mean, its not like they are sacred male and female roles – but I have no idea how a car works and would

probably fall for anything they said to me, wresting hundreds of dollars out of my perplexed fists, and Brian has no idea which of my clothes cannot go in the drier and had a tendency to wash everything in hot water which is not good for most everything I wear. So, we split up the jobs accordingly.

When the clothes were dry, Brian came back with the car, newly oiled, and we headed to our coffee shop for a little afternoon work. On our way, we stopped behind a car that had a bumper sticker on it which read

“God, Guns and Guts. Keep America Free.”

For a moment I thought it was ironic, a sort of poetic set of oxymorons. I started to come up with my own.

“Arms, Aggression and Arrogance. Keep America Peaceful.”

“Bars, Bigotry and Battalions. Keep America Safe.”

all the way to

“Zion, Xynophobia and Zeal. Respect the Constitution.”

But then, of course, I remembered I was in Texas and that the guy in front of us was probably not only dead serious but potentially packing. That was a sobering thought.

After doing some caffeinated work for a couple of hours, we headed started a long drive towards Waco, TX. We figured we could make it there that evening, but Texas, we must remember, is enormous. Of course, after Canada, everything else feels like a piece of cake, but still. We drove until we got hungry, paused at a rest stop to cook some soup, and then continued until we were just too tired to go any further, about a hundred miles outside Waco. We parked in a little town Walmart, and settled down to race the Monday and Tuesday crosswords. I won. I'm just saying.

November 24, 2010 – The Day of Destination Texas

We drove to Waco to see the Rangers.

My high school boyfriend Ollie (who may or may not read this blog – I'm leaning towards not, but who knows? Miracles do happen) grew up in North Carolina and upstate New York, but his parents are both Texan, which means Ollie has a slight indeterminate twang that is, in my opinion, very charming. Ollie's mother

grew up in Waco, home of a variety of crazies, but also of her father the Texas Ranger. I think this is unendingly cool, and what makes it even better is that there is a Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum in Waco that houses a bust of Ollie's grandfather, Job Thompson.

We drove to Waco and straight to the museum. We bought our six dollar tickets and headed inside. The Ranger Hall of Fame is about ninety percent fire arms, which Brian found really disconcerting. I didn't notice because I was feverishly going from room to room looking for the busts. This was actually a lot easier than you would think, because there are only about four rooms, but I went back through them all twice to make sure I didn't miss something. I was becoming increasingly disappointed because I had really been looking forward to seeing this bust. I had heard about this bust since it was inducted, which was sometime in the last five years, so it's been a long time coming. Everywhere I turned there were guns and painted pictures and mannequins displaying the olden times of the Rangers, but no Thompson bust. In desperation I meandered out to the front desk to ask if there even was a bust anywhere, and if so where could it possibly be. The receptionist was on the phone, so I indicated that I would wait, and turned to meander around the small lobby. As I rotated, I happened to look up and there, in the lobby, right above the front door, were all the busts. I ran over, ecstatic, and looked along the name plates until I found him. There he was with his ten gallon hat and glasses, which apparently were actually his. I called to Brian, we stared at it for awhile, and then, satisfied, we headed out.

We figured now was as good a time as ever to check out the Texas barbeque options. We Yelped, of course, and found a little place that had been around since the 70s. It was cafeteria style, but really solid, and was showing ESPN on a wide screen tv, which made Brian happy. Then, full and set, we headed south to Austin.

We have heard wonderful things about Austin – that it is an artistic haven, that there is music, that it is a little oasis. Unfortunately, we haven't actually seen Austin because our hotel is sort of on the outskirts. But what a hotel it is! It's like a little apartment complex, apparently totally environmentally friendly (although I'm not entirely sure what that means), with little balconies and benches in front of the doors. The bed is huge and, most importantly, there is a little kitchen with a full oven!

That's the reason we're in the hotel. We wanted to have some semblance of a Thanksgiving holiday, even though we won't be with family. We figured that the best way to enjoy the holiday was to make the most of the family we've got, and cook for one another. So, after we checked in and cleaned up, we headed back out to buy provisions. We found an Austin version of Whole Foods, and went to town. We decided a turkey was too much, so we bought a little chicken with a nice cavity for my mother's stuffing (complete with Pepperidge Farm bread

crumbs, Jimmy Dean sausage, Granny Smith Apple, and an onion). We got some pungent goat cheese for the coming dinner plus some mild goat cheese for appetizers tomorrow and, of course, a pre-made pumpkin pie. Then we headed back to the hotel.

Evening was falling, so we went to sit on our little second-story balcony, and listen to the wind and the birds. Austin is surprisingly tropical, and our hotel amazingly lush. We sat in the humid night, had our cheese and wine, and then fell asleep in anticipation of our first Thanksgiving together.

November 25, 2010 – The Day of Giving Thanks

Happy Thanksgiving!

There are many, many things in my life that I am grateful for. By grateful, I mean that I respect and do not take for granted, that I appreciate every day. My parents and my brother, and my relationship with all three. My education and my opportunities. My theater company. My friends in New York and all over the world. And then there are the things I do occasionally take for granted, like food and shelter and the fact that I have people who will help me if I'm in need, things which I am almost unconscious of but which are also luxuries, and for which I am also thankful.

But on this particular Thanksgiving, there are two very important aspects of my life which I have taken a moment today to appreciate: Brian and this trip. And if I didn't have either one, I wouldn't be in Austin cooking a chicken in a hotel room, giddy and content.

We started the day with a really top notch free breakfast buffet, with some coffee which the hotel claimed was locally roasted. Then we headed back to the room and watched "Some Like It Hot" which is, in my opinion, one of the great movies of all time. Then we hopped out to buy some bread, then back in the apartment for some Thursday crosswords, some video chatting with my family, and then to begin stuffing the bird around 5pm.

I've done this only once before, when I had Thanksgiving with my housemates in San Francisco, and I stuffed and cooked to perfection a large turkey, which we then feasted on for weeks in the form of soup. Having done this once, I entered into the chicken (so to speak) with a certain level of cockiness. I made my mother's wonderful stuffing, and then Brian and I rinsed the bird and propped it on some paper napkins, spread its legs and pushed as much bread and apples and onions and sausage into that little 3.5 pound cavity as could fit. The rest we

set aside, attempted to tie up the legs, and then covered it with butter and shoved it in our little oven. Brian proceeded to make his sweet potatoes, and I waited until the chicken was done to bake the brussels sprouts and remaining stuffing. We basted with Marsala, trying to use as much of it as possible since we knew we weren't going to be bringing it with us, and Brian watched a video of a frenchman carving a chicken in order to copy his technique. Then we set the table, made some gravy from the chicken juice, and came to sit at our first Thanksgiving table together.

It was wonderful. I mean, everything is when you add two sticks of butter to it. But more than that, it was amazing to sit with Brian like family and eat our little feast together.

Then we had a long and slightly drunken video chat with his family, before we turned in for the night. It was a beautiful holiday. Thank you, Habitat Suites. Thank you, chicken. Thank you, Brian. I love you.

November 26, 2010 – The Day of WWOOF

It's time for a change!

Brian and I awoke and ate the left over stuffing which was sort of gross and also really great, then we headed out of Austin to WWOOF.

WWOOF is a great, if slightly disorganized, organization which connects volunteers with organic farms all over the world. It's how Brian and I met, working for a sustainable hostel in California, and we've been eager to do it again ever since. We've spent the past few weeks looking for somewhere to work and finally found a little farm outside of Austin that seemed perfect: mostly vegetables, a few animals, selling things at the farmers market, etc. So off we drove, arriving by early afternoon at this little old converted barn with a large yard filled with vegetables.

Kathleen, the woman who runs the place is very eccentric, and clearly out of her mind because she decided to do this about two years ago with very little farming experience, but extremely nice and deeply determined, and I like her a lot. There is one other WWOOFer here named Natalie who is 20 and also friendly. The danger with WWOOF is that you can always come across some spiritual hippie who doesn't actually have any drive or ability, who will sort of make you feel uncomfortable. I mean, I love a hippie ideal – I consider myself a hippie in that I don't agree with consumerism and I try to stay off the grid as much as possible – but I definitely don't love being around people who have a sort of holier than thou complex and don't really have much ambition. Luckily, no one here is like

that, so Brian and I felt at home pretty much immediately.

Kathleen wanders around the farm with her hand rolled cigarettes hanging out of her mouth chatting away. She is the most voracious conversationalist I've ever been around, and will keep talking even when she's left the room. Kathleen's house is beautiful – she built it herself. That's only one of the many things she's done in her life, including run a B&B, run a comedy club in Austin, and be a nurse in a Central American country. She's an absolute riot. The thing I've noticed, however, which does make me nervous, is that she clearly likes things done a certain way but doesn't always give detailed instructions, or forgets something important, so you end up sort of unsure and in danger of screwing up. But while she can be stern or upset if something goes wrong, she also praises generously when you do something right, so you end up feeling pretty good about yourself. At least until the next time she gives you a task that you don't really know how to do. Luckily, Natalie got here two days ago with no farming experience either, so we all are learning together.

Tomorrow is a market day, so we spent the afternoon crouched in the garden picking. I picked lettuce and spinach, Brian picked arugula. We also led to goats to pasture and added a tin wind barrier to the goat house. The fields are filled with these horrible little burrs that prick whenever you touch them. I say prick, but it's more like they impale you – it feels like tiny splinters are everywhere, and you can't seem to get away from them. They're on your clothes, in your socks, and they're tiny so you can't always tell where they are before you accidentally grab one. I mean, these things induce shouts of pain. They're really shocking, and totally unpleasant. So after a few hours of squatting in the field, picking sharp needles out of skin and avoiding enormous spiders, we headed back into the house to clean the lettuce. Then it was back out to the field to cover up some of the leafier vegetables before the cold snap that evening, tacking the edges down with rocks and various pieces of farm equipment. Then Natalie and I headed behind the shed to clean some more lettuce, freezing our hands until cold water felt hot. Then it was back inside to put together little bunches of radishes and storing everything in the sun room with the window open so nothing would wilt.

This was all over the span of about six hours, and by the end we were totally beat. I have never really done manual labor before – the hosteling gig was a vacation by comparison, but this is her farm and her livelihood, and all three of us are aware of the fact that if we mess up, we are hurting her chances for survival. So, I think we are all prepared for the hard work. Brian and I are only going to be here two weeks probably before heading out again, and frankly we're both happy to have the work – it's nice to feel exhausted after being totally sedentary.

With WWOOF, there's no pay, but there is lodging and, most importantly, free

food. Kathleen went and picked up a pizza for us and we had it with some salad and roasted garlic. Then we sat around chatting before we all practically passed out around 10:30. Tomorrow, we'll be up at 6:30 in order to get to the market by 9. I can't wait.

November 27 – December 10, 2010 – The Days of Texan Farming

Perhaps you have been wondering where we have been and what we have been up to. Perhaps you have turned on your computer every morning for the past two weeks and eagerly typed in beastranger.net, coffee mug in hand, ready to hear more American adventures from the wandering couple, only to be totally bummed out at the complete lack of updating. Every day, a greater disappointment. Oh no! What happened to our errant heros? Or you've been craving your daily distraction at work, only to find that we haven't been updating, and you're forced to return to facebook for the fourth or fifth time that hour. You're angry, upset, perhaps (if you're my mother) worried, and still no post appears. Days turn into weeks. Where the hell are they?

I know. I'm sorry. But I have an excellent excuse.

Farming is hard work. Crazy hard. I come from farming stock, and I was glad to have a chance to get back to my roots, but I was not prepared for the manual part of manual labor. In a fairly typical 20th century American familial story, my grandfather grew up on a farm, went to war, went to college on the GI bill, moved to the suburbs, got a desk job, and insured that none of his descendants would ever have to work the land again.

Of course, his farming was slightly different – I mean, we're talking many many acres of flat land in Illinois, back before most of the country even had electricity, where fathers and sons worked side by side until at least one of them dropped dead. The farming I've been doing is of the 21st century organic variety, and is mostly people who have never been farmers but who have a strong social and/or political motivation to help fight big food business and contribute to a sort of back to the land revolution.

Brian and I decided to WWOOF for many reasons – we were getting restless and wanted to pause for longer than a couple of days in a single spot, we wanted to save a little money, and we needed to feel productive and have a reason to get up in the morning. Neither of us will ever be farmers, as the last two weeks have proven, but we are both concerned about our food sources and the future of

American farming, and we were happy that we could contribute in some small way.

So we have been farming for the last two weeks without a break, working dawn to dusk tilling, feeding, weeding, picking, and selling. Here is a typical day:

- the alarm goes off at 6:55am, and we lie in our bed at the top of the house and wait for the sun to properly rise, at which point the goats start bleating. Then we jump up and get dressed and run down to feed all the animals. The goats get expired groceries which Kathleen picks up three times a week from the local store, the chickens get about two cups of feed spread along a line so that they don't trample each other trying to eat, and Pax the dog gets a couple handfuls of dry food and a forkful of wet food. We check for eggs – the chickens haven't been laying a lot recently, which is really problematic for Kathleen – then we head back inside for some coffee and oatmeal. - Kathleen takes her son to school 7:30. We kill time until she gets back, or until it's warm enough to venture out into the fields. Most mornings we have to uncover the vegetables – we put sheets over them to keep them from freezing at night when it gets below 30. Then there are a variety of tasks: - Some days we till – for the first week we did this by hand with a hoe and our hands, going along overgrown rows and turning the dirt. It is back breaking, living the heavy metal implement over your head and bringing it down with enough force to unhook deeply buried weeds. Brian usually took on this task because it requires a fair amount of strength, but I did it for a few of our 24 rows that we hoed over the two weeks. If you're not hoeing, you're weeding, down on your hands and knees pulling out clover or dead grass. Then you have to rake the row back into a neat straight line and get rid of all the pulled weeds. - Some days, especially the day before market days or on days when people came to pick up baskets from the farm, we were picking. It's a fairly easy task, with specifics for each plant: you pick the outer leaves of spinach and arugula, leaving the inner ones so that it can keep growing; you pick the nicest leaves off of the lettuce, the ones which look the most appetizing; you cut bok choy, broccoli and cauliflower with a knife at the stem; you pull beets up by the roots; etc etc - Some days there is pruning to be done, especially in the winter when some vegetables have frozen and their outer leaves are dead – like the kale, which was looking pretty sickly - Some days we mounded the vegetables which had been flattened by the wind or the blankets - Some days we mulched our newly hoed rows - Some days we watered the parched earth, which hadn't seen rain in weeks - Most days we had to repair the irrigation system, which kept cracking in the cold - Around 10am we take the goats out of their paddock to another part of the property so they can graze. There they cry out like they're being tortured until eventually they quiet down, occasionally bleating to remind us that they're still there and still annoying. - Feed the chickens at noon-ish - More field work in the afternoon. Sometimes we wouldn't eat until two or three, and believe me that's difficult when you're doing a lot of physical work. Kathleen has the stamina of some powerful field animal (horse? ox?) and she's in her fifties, which is pretty

embarrassing for the rest of us, but we're not really used to the work yet. - We usually finish up around 5 or 5:30, and on most nights have to recover the vegetables, which is a tedious but fairly straight forward task. On windy days it's more annoying, but we anchor with rocks and tools, one sheet covering three rows, until all the vegetables are safe - Bring in the goats, feed the animals again, bring in any eggs - Dinner is late, around 8 or so, and then Natalie, Brian and I sit up with a beer until 10 and then we pass out.

Of course, there were side projects and special events. We got to work at two farmers markets, which were awesome. I am a big fan of customer service, so I chatted it up. Brian and I also built a milking stand out of old wood for the pregnant goats, who are supposed to give birth in January, which will hopefully make them less needy.

Kathleen is tough and crazy and difficult and I like her a lot – she's impressive, running the farm alone with a six year old boy to take care of. She can hoe a row alone in half the time it takes two 25 year olds, and she started the farm from scratch. She's had ten different jobs, and she's smart and very Texan. She also doesn't always explain herself completely, flies off the handle when she's upset, and can be totally two faced – saying you're amazing at one moment and then turning around and telling a customer that you're slowing down the next. She didn't have the money to feed us very much, so while her food was excellent, it was often not nearly enough, especially for Brian, so we ended up supplementing with our own money a lot, which sort of meant we were paying to work there. The worst part was the fact that she wasn't always clear about what she wanted, or totally organized in how she went about farming, which meant that you were prone to messing up and then getting yelled at. I learned quickly to just ask many many questions and just put up with her saying "Well I've already said this four times" if it meant I could get new information out of her each time. I told her I would feed the animals each morning, but it took her three or four days to trust me and let me do it, instead of doing it herself and getting passive aggressive about it. The first couple of days were really hard, and Kathleen could be really mean when she was angry, but it got better as time went on and she learned to trust us and we learned more about what she needed from us. She was very good at praising us when we did something right, which helped a lot. She's the kind of person who goes with whatever emotion she's feeling, so if she was pissed off she was yelling, whereas if she was happy she was hugging you. We frequently awoke to her yelling first thing in the morning, shouting "Holy Shit!" or various other expletives before she had her coffee. But I remain impressed by her and I am glad I was able to help her out for a couple of weeks.

Obviously, the hardest part of WWOOFing is the fact that you are perpetually a guest in someone else's space, and you can never truly be at home. In the two times I've WWOOFed, there are two things which make this easier: the place and the other people.

Wimberly, the town near EIEIO, is really quaint and the area is beautiful. The landscape is surprisingly lovely and green, and I'm sure that in the summer it is even more lush. Kathleen was really good about taking us around, and we got a chance to visit various local spots, including a place called Jacob's Well, which is this incredibly deep hole in the middle of a river. That description sounds really stupid, and while accurate, doesn't even remotely do it justice. It's a beautiful spot, and almost magical, as is the river park she drove us to, with trees bursting out of the creek bed, and ropes hanging from branches of ancient oaks. The area is surprisingly wet for a dry part of Texas, and there are little bodies of water everywhere, including a spring in Kathleen's backyard, which fills up a creek bed of her own. But mostly it is the town of Wimberly that makes the place worth visiting – The people have a really strong sense of community and the importance of local business. They have successfully repelled the advance of corporate food chains, voting to keep out a Burger King, and have a small square full of little restaurants and thrift stores. Their football team went all the way to State while we were staying there, and there were signs up all over town urging them on. Every year in early December they have an event called the Trail of Lights, where various businesses and groups from town put up Christmas light displays in the amphitheater near the high school, and so the whole area becomes a sort of outdoor museum of twinkling colors. On the night that the trail opens, everyone from town comes and brings the kids and the whole community celebrates the season. There are dollar hot dogs and free hot chocolate, with town policemen giving out the food. There are prizes and concerts and a small ride for the littlest kids. The whole area feels vibrant and alive, and there are young families all over the place. It seems to have a really liberal vibe while remaining staunchly Texan, and the people care about art and food and their general quality of life, and everyone we met seemed to love living there. That actually might be the best part of WWOOFing – the chance to live in places, even for a few weeks, that you might otherwise never see.

The other great part of WWOOFing is the people you WWOOF with. In Cambria, I was lucky enough to work with Grace, who went on biking adventures with me and has remained my friend since then. This time, we were with Natalie the whole two weeks. Natalie is awesome – she's smart and funny and totally reminds me of my friend Margaret when we were in college together. She's twenty, and not interested in school, and came WWOOFing because she wanted to try something new. I spent days picking and gossiping with her, and then in the evenings drinking and unwinding. Aside from the fact that she made the work go faster, it was really nice to have a female to hang out with after over a month of just Brian. Don't misread that – I love hanging out with Brian since he's, you know, my partner and best friend, but it was nice to hang out with a girl for a change, and Natalie was exactly what I was missing.

Then there was Graf. I don't know how to describe Graf exactly. He's easily the strangest person I've ever met. He was convinced that he could summon the

wind, that the number 11 was following him, that he had powers that he was learning to control. He would stare off into space and then say “Don’t you just wish that you could burn things with your mind?” or you’d tell a story and he’d repeat certain words, like he’d never heard them before. For example, Kathleen was telling us about a pie she had made and she said “I added strawberry and rhubarb” and Graf says “Rhubarb!” and then starts in on a completely different topic. Sometimes in the field he’d just let go of his farming implement and close his eyes and raise his arms. Once we were heading out to work and he said “It’s a beautiful day. I can’t wait to take off my clothes!” He seemed to have an aversion to shirts, and was frequently barebacked, sometimes in multicolored short shorts. The weather was sometimes hot, but even when it was cold enough for a sweatshirt, there he’d be, dirty and tanned, long hair matted against his head, working away in shorts and slip on shoes. There were terrible burrs too, burrs which stuck in your skin and splintered all over, burrs which wouldn’t go away, which you’d find in your bed and in your shoes, which must have had some kind of poison in them because I’ve never been in so much pain before, burrs which could illicit a yelp of pain even through my winter gloves which I wore for farming. Graf didn’t seem to notice or care. He also had a variety of political theories, which seemed to be based on a fairly loose understanding of our government. He once said that he had been working hard for a very long time, at which point we said “Aren’t you 18?” to which he replied “Almost.” If you called him out on something odd he said he’d just say “Whatever!” and keep going. He once listed Hinduism as one of the three major monotheistic religions. Every day was an adventure in conversation with Graf.

At first I was really not a fan. He seemed like a slacker and a terrible worker, and I was frustrated because we frequently had to work twice as hard to make sure he didn’t screw everything up. I used to have to follow around behind him when we covered vegetables because he wouldn’t anchor the sheets, or he’d anchor them with a sprinkling of dirt. It was shocking to me, but I think he has trouble listening to directions. I know that in the telling of Graf, it sounds like he’s trying to be weird, trying to be out there. But I am certain that this is just who he is, and the truth is that after a few days, I started to like him more and more. There’s something endearing about him, and I think he was trying really hard. He’s also hysterical, and his stories and mannerisms are endlessly interesting. Usually by the end of the day he was comfortable enough with all of us to have conversations with us, but each day it was like Graf was born anew, and we had to all get used to each other again. One morning he was walking right behind me talking and just to see if he was really following me, I walked in a circle and then cut through some bushes, and sure enough he followed instep through the brush. He’s sort of out to lunch all the time, but I think he really wants to do well, and in the end I found myself very fond of him. He’s sweet and earnest and totally unique.

He took a real shine to Brian, as did Kathleen’s son. They both followed him

around and Brian, being a deeply patient individual, hung out with them constantly. At one point, the six year old walked up to me, looked up and said “Where is he?” I pointed upstairs and up he trotted. A couple of minutes later, Graf walked up to me, looked up and said “Where is he?” I pointed upstairs and up he went too. They followed him around and looked up to him and he was wonderful. Kathleen, who is single, at one point told me that she thought Brian was amazing and was looking for her own Brian.

We worked hard these past two weeks. The funny thing is that the hours just flew by. Gardening is a totally serene activity, almost meditative. You’d start at 9am and the next thing you knew, it was 1pm. I have never helped my mother garden, have never shown any interest in doing any kind of work with vegetables or living creatures, am deeply afraid of spiders and most other insects, and am not the biggest fan of dirt. And yet I found myself totally in love with the work. There is something totally satisfying about farming work – you labor for hours, sweating and back aching, but then you have a basket full of vegetables, or a beautiful clean row, or moist earth. It’s wonderful – you can really see the fruits of your labor, so to speak. It’s a fantastic feeling. And there’s a sense of purpose and necessity to it all: if you don’t weed, the plants will die; if you don’t feed the animals, they will die. I kept thinking of a saying my great uncle, who was a farmer, used to repeat: “The cows don’t know it’s Christmas.” And it’s true. It doesn’t matter if you’re sick or tired or it’s a holiday or a Sunday or what – the work still has to get done, and if you don’t do it, things will die. And I found that drive extremely rewarding, especially after months of having to make up reasons to get up in the morning, of creating importance for myself out of really nothing. It was a really good change of pace.

Of course, it had to end. The truth is, I am not a farmer. I like people more than plants and animals. I am still pretty freaked out by little critters, and I certainly could never farm in Texas in the summer – I hear there are scorpions and tarantulas, and that simply will not fly with me. More than once I got fire ants all over me and had to strip down and smack them off while they bit me, and I can’t do that for very long. But I learned a lot about farming, about how hard it is and how rewarding, how financially strapped American small farms are, how important it is to buy local, to pay attention to where your food comes from, and about how much better things taste when they’re fresh. I learned that I want to have a garden at some point, that it is incredibly relaxing, and now I have some sense of how it all works and that I would like to learn more. And I’ve remembered how much I love having a schedule and that I will be ready to return to the working world when this trip is over. It was a nice break from the road.

Kathleen told us that we were the best WWOOFers she’s ever had, and I’m inclined to believe her. We did some good work. It’s a great place, and I wish her a lot of success. And now it’s time to move on.

December 11, 2010 – The Day of Coming Home

So, after two weeks of living in a house, waking up early, being productive and working hard, it's back to life in the truck.

I'm not going to lie: I was excited.

Not that the farm hasn't been wonderful. It has. More than that, it was exactly what we needed, as we were starting to feel a little lost, a little directionless. We had planned everything up until Santa Fe pretty clearly, and then suddenly we found ourselves in New Mexico with no idea of how to go forward. We knew we were headed for New Orleans, but when we thought we might arrive was unclear, let alone how on earth we were going to get through the mammoth state blocking the way. Our foray into Texas was inauspicious (you will recall, I hope, my new favorite bumper sticker), and I was beginning to wonder if it was all going to be downhill from here until New York.

And then farming, and a lovely town, and our spirits were revived. We had a schedule and a route once more! A few days in Austin, a few in San Antonio, a trip along the coast, zipping right past everyone's least favorite city Houston, in time for Christmas and New Year's in New Orleans. Hooray!

So, we awoke excited to continue and grateful for the break. We awoke and realized we didn't have to feed the animals because that was the new WWOOFer Justin's job, and there was much celebrating. We awoke, and helped Kathleen load everything into her car for the New Braunfels farmer's market, said goodbye to a teary six year old and a sleepy Graf and headed off with Natalie to Austin.

Our car has suffered much in the past two weeks. That might seem odd, but the few times we've used it (to pick up groceries in town, to go to a bluegrass concert in San Marcos), there's been at least one person in muddy boots lying down illegally in the back. We managed to do a couple of loads of laundry before we left the farm, but the dirt and burrs were still all over the truck, not to mention the trash we've casually tossed in the front. So when we pulled into Austin, our first order of business (after a hearty breakfast) was to clean. We soaped up the outside, removed everything from the inside, vacuumed and reorganized and, feeling much better, went off to explore the city.

I've heard nothing but amazing things about Austin – that it's this wonderful city full of liberals and artists, that it's beautiful, that it's like a little oasis in the middle of the state. I was so excited to finally explore this magical place.

Well, all I can say is that people seem to have set the bar for “great city” really low.

It took us forever to find the part of Austin that wasn't simply suburban. The whole place is totally spread out, which by now in the trip shouldn't actually be all that surprising, but is still disheartening. The downtown is, like many American downtowns, dead on the weekends, and the streets are mostly suburban homes. We three parked near the university, figuring that might be a good place to start, and walked through deserted streets until we came to the campus. It's a pretty enough campus, with big white buildings and a sort of austere entrance quad, but there didn't seem to be a lot in the neighborhood. So, after a lie down on the grass, we headed back to the car and drove to South Austin, a neighborhood recommended by Justin. Over the bridge and along first street, we found the more vibrant area. We also found Once Over Coffe, a coffee shop that had been recommended to us by a woman who had played music at the farm one night. So, we parked and got out and walked a couple of blocks.

It was late afternoon and we'd found the interesting part of Austin. We'd been looking for hours.

To be fair, it was cute. There were lots of unique stores, lots of restaurants, and it was moderately attractive, with tree lined streets. There was an arts market going on, so we wandered in and out of booths, and ended up eating at a food truck – an old 1960s style metal trailer permanently parked in a vacant lot, one of many all around the area. Then we headed over to the cafe and hung out on their back porch overlooking Barton Creek. I had started out being really disappointed in Austin, and I still was not enamored the way I was hoping I would be, but it was seeming like we could maybe hang out a couple of days without wanting to die.

After the coffee, we drove away from the hipsters, to the north part of the city, which is pretty run down. We dropped Natalie off at the home of a guy she'd met at the Farmer's Market, a musician who sells hummus and lives in the guest house of a place with a tin fence. It was sad, actually. I like Natalie a lot, and I'm really glad she was farming with us. But she's promised to come to New York to prove to me that the bagels and hot dogs and pizza aren't the best in the world (except that they are and this is a futile debate).

After we said our goodbyes, we drove back to the outskirts of the city, to the hotel we'd stayed in for Thanksgiving. It's quiet out there, and the hotel is sort of pretty, so we figured it would be a good place to park. We were totally exhausted by dusk, but forced ourselves to stay awake until ten, at which point we passed out. We slept until loud rap music from a neighboring car woke us in the middle of the night. But that too passed, and we slept again until dawn. It was good to be back home.

December 12, 2010 – The Day of Embracing Austin

OK, so maybe I was too quick to judge. This is probably my fatal flaw in an epic, ancient Greek sense. Or just an annoying quirk.

I stick by my guns about one point though – Austin is not all it's cracked up to be. To hear Austonians talk, Austin is the best city in the whole world and there is no other city that even remotely compares and you're a fool for not living there too. It's all the hubris of Texas combined with the sheer arrogance of people who live in major cities, creating one giant Lone Star love fest and I just don't buy it. But, as a New Yorker, I completely understand hometown pride, and I find it rather appealing, even if I don't particularly agree.

That said, we had a lovely day in Austin.

It's Sunday, so of course it was time for coffee and the Sunday crossword. We woke up, and I had a fleeting fear that I had forgotten to feed the goats until I remembered that I was squished in the back of a truck and the goats were sixty miles away. So, we got up, baby wiped ourselves into some approximation of clean, and drove to Once Over Coffee.

(My mother has suggested that when I sit down to chronicle this journey, I should do it through an outline of coffee shops. I think that this is a great idea, and will take this into consideration as we move forward. I do have an extreme affinity for the local cafes, and I do go to a lot of them. I'm considering this option. Thoughts?)

Once Over Coffee is cute. Natalie said she thought it looked like every patron had a stick up his or her ass sideways, but I have a feeling that's what Brian and I look like when we sit at our computers with our lattes as well, so it doesn't bother me too much. The seating isn't terribly comfortable, but the outdoor patio is really pretty. Unfortunately it was far too cold to sit outside, so we were stuck inside with our crossword. After a couple of hours of work, we headed back over to South Congress, and walked through the stalls to see if we couldn't find Christmas presents. We couldn't, but I love local markets and walking anywhere is a nice change of pace from the truck.

The day before we had gone into a variety of the stores, like Allen's Boot Store where a pair of really nice cowboy boots (and yes, Texans really do wear cowboy boots and, sometimes, ten gallon hats) goes for \$600, or Lucy in Disguise with Diamonds where costumes are tagged with genre and have little pieces of paper with ideas for accessories and shoes and wigs attached to each outfit. Since we'd

done a little tour then, there was no real reason to do much more than window shop until we came to our lunch destination, a free range burger joint called Hop Doddy. The burger was fine, not great, but the stuff on the burger (in my case, goat cheese and mushrooms and pesto) was awesome. It's no Shake Shack, though.

We continued our meander up South Congress with a goal in mind: Miniature Golf. I am not much of a mini golf player, having only really done it once or twice in my life, but the idea sounded fun and this little place was tucked away in the middle of a busy street, and what better way to spend a lazy Sunday in Austin? When we got there, however, we discovered that we were clearly not the only people who had this particular yen for multicolored golf balls, but we were the only sober ones. The place was actually crawling with drunk hipsters. Drunk foreign hipsters, probably Australian. Luckily, after a couple of holes of us waiting patiently for them to finish before us, they politely let us pass them and after that we had a much nicer time.

After our golfing adventure, we walked the long way back to the car along Lamar, passing more food trailers, each shiny metal, each in a vacant lot. I didn't realize this was such a thing in Austin, and I totally dig it. We eventually came to one called Gourddough's Donuts. I am not a big donut fan – I think they're way too sugary and generally unappealing in their decadence, but I figured you only pass a trailer selling freshly made donuts every once in a blue moon, and besides these particular donuts had toppings like "chocolate brownie pieces" and "a strip of fried chicken" (no, really). We opted for the comparatively safer "Mama's Cake" which had a chocolate glaze and cake batter inside, and the "Razzle Dazzle" with raspberry jelly and chocolate glaze. We had to wait while they made them, the whole time wondering if we'd made a mistake.

No, we did not. I didn't know what donuts were until I had these donuts. It was crispy and chewy and the icing was thick and wonderful. I had no idea donuts could be like this. Apparently Texans do, and for this I am eternally grateful, not least because I never need to have a donut again.

We tried to walk it off by high tailing it back through the leafy neighborhoods of South Austin to our car, but it continued sitting like a really tasty rock in our stomachs for the rest of the night. We tried watching Monty Python but only got about half way through it before we had a massive sugar crash and passed out.

December 13, 2010 – The Day of Lazy Monday

So, we slept in.

Obviously, we're not exactly tied to a work schedule right now, but we have been trying to wake up and get going every morning, and certainly for the past couple of weeks we've been up and at 'em with the sun rise.

But today, we lazed around. Partly because we haven't been crazy impressed by Austin and couldn't really motivate ourselves to go explore, but mostly because we just sort of wanted to. So we woke up, watched the rest of Monty Python and the Holy Grail, fell back asleep, woke up, hung out, lazed around in the back of the truck, and finally climbed into the cab around noon or so. The bed of that truck can be deceptively comfortable, with the foam and comforter and sleeping bags and pillows and our bag of clothes.

When we finally did get up, we ran a couple of errands (including sending our payment for the ticket we got way back in Cheyenne) and then went in search of a new coffee shop. Brian wasn't crazy about Once Over, and so even though I sort of liked it, we drove off to find Cafe Medici, which came highly recommended on Yelp.

We found it west of the campus, and it was crowded, with little tables and excellent coffee. It was fine, I still preferred Once Over – Brian and I are clearly divergent in our Austin coffee shop tastes – but it was fine for a few hours of work. Since our day had been mostly wasted, by the time we were done working it was 7pm and properly dark. So we headed off for dinner, but the place where we wanted to dine was closed for a holiday party. So we re-yelped and ended up driving part-way back to Wimberly to check out Jack Allen's, a Texan-style restaurant.

It was huge! Not big in space, but in scale, if that makes any sense. Tall ceilings, wide tables, large people. Everyone looked nice except for us (a theme, I'm sensing), and the food was pretty good. It even felt a little fancy, even though it wasn't really that expensive. Brian had a really good steak, which is my personal minimum expectation in Texas, and my chicken was no slouch either. There was a whole section of the menu that was chicken-fried, but neither of us was feeling the deep fat (probably the donut from yesterday).

We had a great meal, after a really nice day of just hanging out. It's funny, because we were definitely together the whole time we were farming, but after a couple of months of just being around one another, we had missed the intimacy of being alone while we were working. It was nice to just be lazy together – it made me think of what days off will be like when we get back to New York, get back to jobs and careers, and we wake up some Sunday morning and spend the whole day just being together.

December 14, 2010 – The Day of San Marcos Revisited

We left Austin, and there was much rejoicing.

To be honest, I'm sort of sorry I didn't like Austin more. I was really hoping I would find a little city of my heart in the middle of big, scary Texas, but alas. It's clear that there is an artistic heart beating at its center, but at the end of the day Austin just isn't enough of a city for me. I need sidewalks and people and some kind of urban center that feels distinctly un-suburban. Austin just isn't it.

Before we left, however, we did manage to have our two nicest Austin experiences of the past few days. After weeks of avoiding our bag full of running stuff, we decided the time to exercise had finally arrived. So we threw on our shoes and sweat clothes, and headed to the river. There is, in case you were unaware, a giant river running through the heart of Austin. It is not the river of "river walk" fame – that's in San Antonio. It's just a big river with parks along its edges, and we headed for Lady Bird Lake. When we got there, however, we were unimpressed, and so headed along the river on the south side back towards downtown until we came to Disch Field, where dogs were running and people were jogging and the attractive (if petite) skyline of Austin sat right across the water. We parked, meandered across the parched lawn to the dirt path next to the river and started running.

It was a hard twenty minutes. That's right. Twenty. Don't judge. But it was absolutely beautiful, surprisingly beautiful. It felt almost like New York (I really try not to compare all cities to New York, but when I do, it is usually a compliment), with the tall buildings shaded from view by the arching trees and the water. We ran under the highway (which was quiet and seemed almost peaceful), over a little foot bridge, past Barton Creek (a recommendation of Justin's – thank you Justin!), until we hit our mark and stopped. Then we meandered back to the car, under the leafy trees, past the natives of the city.

Feeling significantly better about Austin than I had all weekend, we headed off for another of Justin's suggestions – a little place called Juan in a Million over on the east side of town. \$4 breakfast taco, piled high with food, in an outdoor patio covered by a tent – wow. I didn't know that eggs, bacon, potatoes and cheese could taste like that, but apparently I've been eating that combination wrong all my life. Thank you, Juan.

And so we left Austin on an incredibly high note, which made me feel much better about my prior and continuing ambivalence. Austin just clearly isn't for me, but it does have some fantastic food and a decent running path, so I can let it sit positively in my memory.

We drove back towards our two-week home of Wimberly to San Marcos, a large-ish town on the highway between Austin and San Antonio. We had been there one evening for bluegrass at this coffee shop called Tantra, and had liked the place so much that we decided it was the perfect place to work for the day before heading to San Antonio. So we came back into town, a place chock full of junky joints and corporate clutter except for the cute downtown, insulated from the crap. There, near the court square, was Tantra, and we had excellent coffee and a couch and desk all to ourselves for hour.

As night fell, we decided to head in search of food, and began a long wander around the small downtown. The courthouse was decked out in Christmas lights and decorations, and a tv news crew had set up their anchors to do a segment which read, behind their heads, "My Hometown!" I've been sort of sad traveling through the south at Christmas time. Brian is used to warm Christmas, but I love snow and coats and scarves and hot fires. Both of us miss our families an awful lot – this will be Brian's second Christmas away from home – but the warmth of south Texan nights just makes me ache for the hiss of heaters in New York. The Christmas lights do help, however, and it seems that every town in Texas has its own little Trail of Lights like the one we went to in Wimberly, and that can help as we drive down dark highways.

Anyway, our first option for food was closed, so we headed out towards our second option about half a mile away. When we got there, we decided the food was too fancy and expensive for our tastes that evening – we were really jonesing for a beer. So we headed back into town and to the hopping bar on the back alley of the main street. We walked in and were greeted by music, tvs, and smoke! I forgot what it feels like to stand in an enclosed area surrounded by food and cigarettes, but it made me so so grateful to the New York State legislature for enforcing smoking ban in bars and restaurants. We stood there for a minute, contemplating the haze and the lack of tables, and then headed out once more to search for food. We settled upon a pub with an older crowd and no smoking, with the rather appealing subheader "Irish Pub, Texas Grub". Thanks to Hannah, I have become a disciple of local taps, and try to get the beer from the closest brewery available. This doesn't always work out well – some places just don't have good beer nearby. But the area of Texas between Austin and San Antonio is rife with excellent beers. I had a Shiner and Brian had a 512, and they were amazing. The food wasn't bad either, and you can't beat a low key Americanized pub for ambiance. So we sat, watched some tv, Brian told me all about the great basketball players in recent history, and then we headed back to the car for some sleep.

December 15, 2010 – The Day of Discovering

the Alamo

I was not excited for San Antonio.

I actually couldn't figure why we were going out of our way for a Texan city. So far, Texan cities hadn't exactly been impressing me, and San Antonio certainly didn't sound that great. It's apparently where the Alamo is, but since the phrase "remember the Alamo" doesn't exactly strike any patriotic chords in me (partially because I don't know why we're supposed to remember the Alamo, and partially because even if I did I'm not sure it's the kind of historic event I'd particularly care about), the appeal of driving into the city, parking and actually getting out to look at the Alamo, whatever the hell it is, didn't seem like incentive enough for the trip.

Of course, it's not just the Alamo. Everyone we talked to also kept referring to these river walks, and how wonderful they were, but all I kept picturing was some Disney-esque bullshit around an ugly river surrounded by McDonalds. Plus, we had heard from Justin that San Antonio was really incredibly dangerous, and so on the whole, the day was not looking promising.

Boy was I wrong!

San Antonio is beautiful! Architecturally, the city feels sort of paused in the 1920s and 1930s, and the sidewalks are wide and easily strolled. But it's the river walk that makes the city. Everyone was right – the river walk is amazing. Sure, at points it feels a little touristy, but on the whole, they did a beautiful job creating a whole almost European ambiance. Trees drip over the clear water, and stone bridges with winding and hidden stair cases stretch over it at every turn. My favorite bridge was made of metal on top, a typical green car bridge with tall geometric arches, but the whole thing was encased in stone on the bottom, for a really neat melding of looks. All around the river, the city rises prettily. The buildings have balconies and the shops have open doors and the whole area feels totally inviting. On top of that, there's an amphitheater! A stage sits on one side of the river, and grassy benches coming out of the earth slope on the other. It's ideal for Shakespeare, with the winding water and the nearby bridges, and sound travels surprisingly well. I was totally taken, and immediately started trying to figure out what kind of performances happen there. As river boats past, every one of them mentioned the scene in *Miss Congeniality* that was filmed here, but not one said anything about the actual events that might take place on warm summer nights. I checked the website, but it was surprisingly bereft of information as well. It occurred to me that perhaps San Antonio doesn't have enough performing arts groups to really take advantage of this cool space. So I've decided that if I ever make lots and lots of money, I will bring a group of fellow thespians here to rent the space, and we will put up some Shakespearean comedy, using the river, the bridge, the stage, and the balconies of the

surrounding buildings. Mark my words, San Antonio.

Brian and I walked for an hour or so in the morning sunlight, and the air felt almost tropical. The river has been expanded to include more of the city as the city has grown, and rather than being ugly or obvious, its a rather brilliant idea – it makes the whole place feel cohesive and pedestrian friendly. So we were able to walk from downtown to the convention center and, of course, over to the Alamo, where we resurfaced and headed for this apparently important part of our collective history.

Turns out, the Alamo is where the Texans lost a battle against the Mexican army and where, I soon discovered, Davy Crockett died. I can only imagine that the reason I don't know much about the Alamo is because I just didn't retain any of the information when I was learning about US history in fifth grade due to a distinct lack of interest in Davy Crockett or Texan history – or Brearley omitted it from our curriculum for the same reason. Either way, now I know – the Alamo is a mission that was bravely defended by a few men, almost all of whom died. It was recalled in the famous shout “remember the Alamo” during later battles, which eventually led to Texan independence. OK cool. On my personal scale of interesting historical landmarks I've visited, the Alamo probably still rates somewhere between “the town where Billy the Kid escaped to for the last time” and “the giant slow moving Millenium Ferris Wheel in London” but I can appreciate its significance to other people. And regardless of my own interest in Texan history, it's an extremely well maintained site, with a pretty garden and a bunch of plaques. And it's free, which is always a bonus, although they do encourage you to donate at every turn. Normally, I would put something in for a monument's preservation, but the Alamo is maintained by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, and while they have done a really wonderful job fighting off development and keeping the Alamo preserved, I don't give money to the Daughters of the anything for a variety of political reasons.

After wandering around the Alamo and appreciating the way it is attractively positioned in the square (despite the wax museum right across the street), we headed back to the river walk, and continued along the water until we got out of the commercial district and headed towards the King William neighborhood, where the river ceases to have shops and buildings, and instead opens onto a thin line of grass and trees. The river is beautiful here as well, and we walked until the river walk met the street, and we ventured in land for food. We found Tito's, a little Mexican restaurant, nearby, and had one of the best meals of our trip. Our waiter was super friendly, and when he told us to come back, I told him we would even though we probably never will. But if I ever find myself in San Antonio again, I know that is where I will head immediately, so it's not a complete lie.

Then we continued walking in the shockingly hot sunshine. It was humid, and

for the first time I realized we were heading into the tropical region of the country. We meandered for awhile longer, and lamented the fact that, despite the pretty city, there really doesn't seem to be a whole lot actually going on in San Antonio. What a pity. It could be a really cool place. We headed back to the car and drove to the Farmer's market, which was four stands. Feeling sort of sorry, we left before dark and headed south towards the Gulf. It was essentially the opposite of my Austin experience, which might say something about both places, but on the whole I'm really pleased we visited. All thanks goes to Steve Martinovich, who suggested it in the first place – I don't think we would have ventured this way otherwise.

We drove for a couple of hours to Victoria, parked in a hotel parking lot (our new favorite camp sight), and slept. Tomorrow, we would get to the Gulf.

December 16, 2010 – The Day of Returning to Sea

We awoke in the typical town of Victoria and hightailed it south to the Gulf.

I'd been missing the ocean. Living in New York, it's easy to forget how much water there is all around – the Hudson, the East River, and just beyond the horizon is the Atlantic. I've lived on an island my whole life, and even though it's not exactly a beach-y existence, I still find myself homesick for water when I spend too much time away from the coast. So it was pretty thrilling to drive into Port Lavaca and see, just down the empty main street, the Gulf shimmering in the humid light.

We drove, windows down, along the coast to Palacios, where we got out and walked out along the long dock. The water was shallow and my favorite bird, the pelican, was in full diving glory. There were even a couple of much larger, white pelicans, and some kind of strange almost skeletal fish hovering out from the pier. We walked, and then dangled our legs over the edge, unable to touch the water, but marveling at the warmth of the sun and the wetness in the air. We walked for a bit along the empty boardwalk, then headed back to the car to drive again.

We drove to Bay City, a city which is not actually anywhere near a bay of any kind. It's inland from the Gulf, but there are signs which point towards some bay which is actually at least two towns away. Poor name choice, Bay City. But while we saw no water, we did find an excellent little coffee shop. I think that my favorite times on this trip have been the moments when, having wandered into some nowhere town in a state not known for its hot beverages, we stumble upon

some excellent little coffee joint with tables and couches and a more than decent brew. It's moments like that which make me love traveling, make me love every place we stop because you just never know what you'll find. So we paused at this particular coffee spot and sat on the couch reading and drinking coffee, listened to the Texan twang coming from our friendly tough barista and from the adjacent hair salon. They were selling Bay City-opoly, and I was almost tempted to buy it, but Brian reminded me with a look that \$25 is probably better spent. Afterwards we wandered around town – it's a fairly typical town, with the courthouse on a square surrounded by four facing streets, but the difference here was that the courthouse was not some old ediface, but a new and really shockingly hideous structure. There's an underground parking garage underneath, although I'm not sure who on earth would park there, and the top is one of those big blocks perched atop a skinny pedestal, brown and windowed, probably built in the 1970s. It's so ugly and out of place that it's almost remarkable, but I refrained from taking a picture.

We drove on and over to Lake Jackson. I don't know what I was expecting. The coastal towns had been sort of cute and coastal, if you know what I mean – beach-y. Freeport was a sudden and unfortunate return to the quotidian hideousness of most American towns. It merges effortlessly with the neighboring towns of Clute and Freeport, all one giant strip mall. The only thing to really recommend it is that Dow Chemical is headquartered there, so this giant factory sort of looms over the town, and I really don't know if recommend is the right word.

We paused in Clute for some Mexican food and had what was easily the worst culinary experience of our trip. It wasn't dive-y or dirty, it was a typical flashy Mexican restaurant of the most mediocre variety – like a chain, even though it wasn't a chain. The salsa tasted like tomato sauce. The servers were friendly. The margaritas were plentiful and multicolored. We should have known better, but sometimes you just make mistakes. It was fine, it just wasn't worth the time.

Then we went to a depressing laundromat just off the main drag, cleaned our clothes and then headed off to look for Nutella. Not only is LakeJacksonCluteFreeport a giant mess of Applebee's and Little Caesar's, it also doesn't seem to have a super market. Apparently people don't cook here, they just go out for incredibly large meals at chain restaurants. Finally we located one, bought our Nutella, and spent the evening competing at Scrabble, which I of course prematurely gave up on because Brian was quickly winning by over eighty points. Whatever. I'm good at other things.

December 17, 2010 – The Day of the Tropical

South

We awoke and got the hell out of Freeport.

We drove until we came to the Gulf at Surfside Beach, and were once again greeted with the beach-y south. It reminds me of the week I spent on the North Carolina shore during a rather dramatic love affair the summer after I graduated college. All the houses are on stilts, and it feels sort of like a run down fairy tale – like that story of the house that has bird claw feet. Anyone? Anyway, that’s what it makes me feel like.

We drove along the highway which runs this string of islands to Galveston, and each island has houses on stilts sort of strewn on either side of the highway with no obvious rhyme or reason to their layout. Then there are long stretches of nothing, and on this windy day, the water was choppy and aggressive and the sky was gray and it all felt very intense. We parked on one of those lonely stretches and walked the shell covered sand to the water. The water, even on a cool day like today, is warmer than the Pacific, and the beach was covered in fine, soft sand. We found some sea glass, which is probably my favorite ocean artifact despite the fact that it only exists because humans litter. Then we jumped back in the car and continued our drive along the string of wind tossed islands.

We finally made it to Galveston. I know nothing about Galveston aside from the fact that a hurricane hit it and nearly leveled it two years ago. The outskirts are filled with attractive, big houses and multicolored buildings on stilts. I was excited at the prospect of various buildings thrust into the air: post office on stilts, high school on stilts, etc. Unfortunately as we got further up the coast, fewer buildings were elevated until finally all of them were grounded. Bummer.

We drove off the seawall (which literally plunges into the roiling ocean), and headed into town, and there we found a coffee shop. A really nice coffee shop, actually, with big tables and comfy couches and good coffee. I love that. The downtown of Galveston is surprisingly attractive, with old Victorian homes and tall buildings on wide sidewalks. We spent the afternoon working and buying Christmas gifts. Etsy is a beautiful website, just fyi.

Afterwards, we headed out in search of a hotel, and found one for \$40. We were psyched by the price (and right by the angry sea, too) until we stepped inside and discovered broken walls and a roach perched in our bathroom. That’s ok. It was a little roach. And sometimes you just have to suck it up. Besides, my apartment is more infested than that, and I live there all the time. Still, it was unnerving, and the atmosphere was pretty creepy, so we put a chair in front of the door and watched TCM until we fell asleep.

December 18, 2010 – The Day of Texan Pratts

The Pratt Family, that is.

Dan and Suzan hightailed it to Texas about nine months ago and have been living in the little town of Bellville ever since. So when I called Ollie from Texas one evening and informed him of my whereabouts, he promptly encouraged me to give his mother a ring.

A little background, for those of you unfamiliar with my high school history: Ollie was my high school boyfriend. Dan and Suzan are his parents. I spent the better part of two years living at their house and I have ever since thought of them as extended family. They've met two of my adult boyfriends, including Brian, and if you think this is weird well, you're probably not alone. But I'm so grateful for my relationship with Ollie – he's more like a brother to me now than anything – and I am glad that Brian not only understands this, but also has a deep affection for that trumpet-playing pickle-seller as well, so the journey to the Pratts seemed not only normal but necessary and positively anticipated.

So, after another waking up and leaving our dingy hotel and spending a few hours at MOD coffee shop in the nicer part of Galveston, we headed north through Houston. I've been dreading Houston – I know nothing about it but what I've heard from other people, so perhaps I am too harsh on this unknown city, but I am here to tell you: we hit traffic. Like, LA-style bad. Actually, the 45 reminded both of us of our origin city, with more chains and strip malls at its edges, not elevated like the great channels of that SoCal monolith, but still a giant and ranging suburb-city with the downtown skyline off in the distance. We agreed on this similarity and then, soon after that, we passed an exit for Pasadena. What?! And then after that, we got on the 10.

The 10, for those of you who don't know, goes across the country from Jacksonville Florida to (did you guess it?) Santa Monica, CA. This was our home freeway! The entrance was just blocks from our house in Venice, and here we were, midway across the country and headed west towards home! How cool. We decided right then and there that Jacksonville was a new destination on our trip, if only to pay homage to our little studio by the sea.

So we drove through downtown Houston, past a ferris wheel and one of those rides that picks you up slowly and drops you fast – the people strapped into their seats waiting to be released towards the earth had an excellent view into our car windows. Why anyone would think that going on an amusement park ride right next to the freeway is a fun way to spend the afternoon is beyond me but then again, I don't live in Houston.

We drove out into the endless suburb – Houston is huge like LA, and feels just

endless, even though technically you are going through many towns. We finally arrived in Katy, an indistinguishable suburb, where we were to meet Suzan and Dan and Ollie's half sister Chrissy at a Mexican restaurant. We arrived, after getting lost a couple of times, and being misled by google maps, twenty minutes late, and wandered in to find the family seated with drinks in hand.

It was a lovely reunion. Suzan kept saying "Can you believe you're here? Can you believe we're here?" and the truth was I couldn't at all. I got a margarita, we heard all about their travels south and how life has been so far, and then we told them about our journey, about the wolves and the moose and freezing cold and mountains and the snow and the Mexican food and farming. We talked for a couple of hours and then said goodbye to Chrissy and headed out to the little town of Bellville.

Looking at a map, I figured Bellville must be part of Houston, but it's not, and thank goodness for that. Suzan had warned us about the ugly courthouse, and it's definitely unattractive, but I am pleased to say that the one in Bay City is far, far worse. We ended up at their home down one of the town streets, parked and headed inside.

The Pratt estate, as I will choose to call their New York abode from now on, is located on some substantial number of acres upstate, with forests and ponds and a barn and fields and a view of the mountains. Their house was lovely when I was a teenager, and is more lovely now since they did some remodeling, and it feels old and strong. The upstairs at Kathleen's farm, where Brian and I slept, had the same old wood and must smell that the Pratt estate has, that same kind of distinct oak-y odor, so I've been thinking about their house for weeks. The home on the Texas plains, by contrast, is small and modern and very cute. The Pratts have done a wonderful job painting and furnishing it, and the whole place feels like their home, even when it's so far away from the home I knew them in.

We sat and chatted for awhile about Ollie and technology and wikileaks. The Pratts, like the Andricks, are the most hospitable people I know. I think one of the reasons why Ollie and Brian get along so well is that both grew up in homes where everyone was welcome all the time. We sat and talked for another hour or so, and then we curled up in their spare bed and fell asleep.

December 19, 2010 – The Day of Discovering Houston

We left the Pratts fairly early in the morning, but not before we had a shower and a meal. Dan had treated us to dinner the night before and then again to breakfast

this morning (thank you again!), when they took out to a little place called The Hill. It was everything homestyle joints in Texas should be, according to my personal mental image. Simple, no frills, order at the counter, drink some terrible coffee, deal with uninterested waitresses, and like it. And I did like it. I had what essentially amounted to a Bisquit McMuffin with Egg, except it wasn't McDonalds so I didn't have to hate myself. It was delicious, and so were Brian's hashbrowns, of which I may have had a few. Suzan informs me they have great burgers, and though I didn't try them, I will promote them here because it seems like the kind of place that would know what to do with some ground beef and a bun.

After breakfast we went back to the house and got our stuff, hugged everyone goodbye and set out. It was a really nice visit, and I was so glad that we made it out to see them. And Suzan was right – it was a total trip to see them in Texas – who'd have thought any of us would be there, let alone at the same time.

We drove back into Austin, thinking we would get some work done, sleep the night and then head out the next day. We found a little coffee shop called Woody's in a neighborhood called The Heights. I'm desperately trying to get all my applications done before Christmas so that I don't have to think about them anymore, and Brian is trying to launch his revamped website. So we drank their coffee, which was fine, and sat in the shop, which was a converted house, which I thought was really cool. Brian wasn't nearly as impressed as I was, but I'm a sucker for cafe-cum-victorian-houses.

We worked for the next few hours, and then, starving, went in search of dinner, thinking we could rustle up some authentic Mexican and then maybe go out. Houston's a drinking city, right?

And thus began a disheartening hour. We drove to a Mexican place recommended by three people on Yelp. Here's a piece of advice: three people does not a quorum make. The place was strange and a little creepy, poorly lit with pinatas hanging from the ceiling. We were the only people there. We strode up to the counter, discovered there was no menu or any list of food of any kind, and the woman serving the food was surly and impatient. Here's my opinion: If I walk into a restaurant and clearly look lost and I don't seem to know what anything is, and you work there, you should help me. I asked what something was, she replied, I asked again because I didn't understand, she said the exact same thing and gave me a look, so I ordered it. It was inedible – it was soft and weird and had this awful squishy texture. Luckily it was cheap, but really, I'm not easy to piss off – I understand food service can suck, but seriously, what the fuck.

So then we went and parked in the car and yelped to find a bar. Nothing. At least, nothing that was appealing to either one of us. There were fancy wine bars

and dives and that's about it. So, after twenty minutes of fruitless searching, we gave up and went back to our old standby: wine and cookies and a streamed movie in the back of the truck. We drove to a hotel on the outskirts of town, parked, popped the cork and watched *The Social Network*.

And you know what? It was lovely.

December 20-21, 2010 – The Days of Eating My Words

Houston is great.

I hate to admit that I'm wrong, but I have been wrong about this city. I was under the impression that it was a concrete jungle, some awful, ugly place without a scrap of beauty or architectural integrity going for it. I was dreading it. We almost completely skipped it. And I am here to say that I was wrong.

To be fair, I didn't know any better, I was just parroting what other people had told me. This just goes to prove that you shouldn't base your opinions on other people because other people don't always have good opinions.

To be fair, I'm basing this entire post off of one neighborhood, and a ritzy one at that, so I am not now saying that I know Houston or that other parts of it aren't atrocious, or that Houston has anything even resembling an artistic soul, or even has all that much to do, but from what I saw over the course of two days is enough to make me at least consider returning.

I'm lumping these two days together because all we did both days was work, but it was the quality of the place where we were working and the area surrounding it that makes me love Houston. We awoke and drove back in from our parking lot, thinking of trying to get coffee somewhere nearby, maybe next to the illusive NASA, but luckily the Vietnamese coffee shop didn't open when it was supposed to, so we left and headed back to our neighborhood from yesterday. We ditched Woody's at Brian's suggestion and headed to a better rated spot nearby in The Heights, a cafe called Antidote. And there we stayed.

Antidote has a few things that make it amazing: great coffee (with a \$3 bottomless cup), a little patio, free wifi, a happy hour with \$2 local beer, and local food. It's the kind of place where people come in the morning and then stay all day and into the night. Brian and I have a running list of our top five favorite coffee shops in the country, and I am proud to say that Antidote sits firmly at a close second behind Philz, and that's saying a lot.

The first day we were there, we arrived mid afternoon and worked until around nine or so, at which point we switched to the outdoors and grabbed wine and a cookie. In between, I worked on my essays and video chatted with my family while they decorated the Christmas tree.

Afterwards, we drove two blocks, past huge houses with grand balconies all decorated for the season. I've been feeling sad about not being home for the holidays, and seeing my family decorate the tree made me incredibly home sick. Parking in a little cul-de-sac, I felt slightly better – still lonely and sad, but enchanted at the same time.

The next day we went for a walk around the neighborhood, meandering down broad streets with cracked side walks and little bridges over wide gutters covered with grass. Tiny one story homes stood next to mansions held up with Greek columns. Where are we? The leafy streets were so pretty and in a park in the middle of the road, a dad played with his kids. How picturesque! How perfect! Happy Holidays!

We left Antidote for food, and found one of a few bar/restaurants – one which, actually, would have been perfect the other night, goddammit – and then returned for happy hour and two dollar Shiner beers. They have these brownies and cookies which say across the back “Butter...is calories well spent” and I couldn't agree with any statement more. That might actually be my credo.

Sleeping in the quiet cul-de-sac of Houston's elite homes was the first time we've really urban camped since San Francisco. All our other experiences have been in parking lots of chain hotels or, worse, Walmart. It was so nice to wake up and see homes, to see homes that actually had signs out front that said “Live Better? Keep Walmart out of The Heights” or something to that effect. It made me feel better about all those depressing mornings waking up to the blue and white monster waiting, doors open, for our cash.

The Heights were beautiful, with cute and grand homes on quiet streets, sprinkled with little stores and coffee shops. The queen of them all was Antidote, and I am firmly a loyal subject.

December 22, 2010 – The Day of the Louisiana Po' Boy

We left Houston, but not before one last coffee at Antidote. I have to admit, pulling out of the driveway, I felt a pang – I have no reason to come back to Houston and I may never see this perfect coffee shop again. My one hope is that I will find some place like that in New York. I haven't yet, but everyone needs to

have faith in something impossible.

We drove out on our beloved 10, and then veered south before crossing the border into Louisiana. The river bend was surrounded by smoke stacks, and the water was dark and muddy. The industrial towns lay out away from the road across incredibly flat land, and marred everything in sight. But eventually, as we moved away from the border, the industry disappeared and all that was left were scattered homes.

Remember the houses on stilts? Remember how I said they reminded me of those fairy tale homes with legs? Well, these houses were also raised above the ground, but just a few inches and usually on cinder blocks, so that these houses were more like jacked cars whose wheels have been stolen. It's sort of strange – but not strange enough – to see all these houses, scattered right and left along the bayou, looking like useless automobiles. The bayou runs along the side of our little highway, and in the water there were birds, long necked egrets bright white against the dark water, or angry looking hawks with ruffled feathers staring into the car. And bugs – bugs everywhere. Anytime we opened our windows, we found ourselves itching and staring at a new bite on our arm or our leg. The sky was grey and the light was both piercing and milky. My father had, by this point, gotten us an extra night in our New Orleans hotel room because, as he put it, he didn't want us wandering around the swamp for days. And that's what lower Louisiana is – it's a swamp. You get the impression that it might get a little damp around here.

We drove for awhile on the Creole Nature Trail, and looked for alligators. The egrets and herons really are incredible – we've been seeing them since Texas, including once at the farm when a heron flew over me with its giant shadow, landing in the driveway and Natalie and I took a break to follow it until it had disappeared into the creek. We saw no alligators, which was sad but, you know, also probably good.

Finally, as the sun broke through, after driving through what can properly be categorized as sleepy southern towns, we made it to Lafayette, our destination for the evening. Why Lafayette? Well, mainly because we were just killing time until we could get to our hotel in New Orleans tomorrow. We drove into town and, starving, searched for creole/Cajun food. I mean, why not? We're officially in that part of the country, and what better time to start than right away.

And boy oh po' boy did we find it. Past the Ragin' Cajun college, we found it. With a billboard that said "Jesus is the Reason for the Season", The Olde Tyme Grocery sat there forceful and unapologetic. You get the sense that this is not the kind of place where you can say "...but no mayo, please." It's actually an old grocery store, as you might imagine, with a kitchen attached to it, so you can have your soda and eat your po' boy too.

Since the oil spill, I don't know how I feel about eating sea food in the Gulf Area, so Brian and I ordered a sausage po' boy and fries, and got some real Louisiana root beer with real Louisiana sugar cane, made by Albita, the local brewery. I believe in getting soft drinks if you're in the place where they come from or where they're made specially (we also had real Dr. Pepper in Waco). We sat at our greasy table, right beside a picture of three kids in front of a Haliburton tent at a fair, gave a "give me strength" look towards the ceiling, and bit in.

Holy shit. I mean, holy shit. I had had a po' boy in New Orleans, and it had sucked, and I figured I just didn't get it. This was a serious sandwich, with spicy sausage and dripping condiments on serious French bread. I mean, it was excellent.

Afterwards, feeling more than slightly ill from the lump of delicious lead in our stomachs, we headed back to the outskirts of town where Brian convinced me to see Black Swan. I, not knowing much about the movie because I haven't been paying attention the last few months, agreed. We went in, took our seats, got all excited about seeing a movie together that wasn't being illegally streamed on the internet, and then watched as the gruesome tale unfolded.

I am not a gruesome kind of a person. I never saw Requiem for a Dream and I probably never will and I'm ok with that. I can't take it when people start hallucinating or flesh comes apart from bone or bright white people with dark circles under their eyes start appearing in corners or mirrors. I'm just not that kind of movie-goer – it's scary enough in my head as it is without someone more twisted than I am putting new images in there. So, needless to say, when Natalie Portman started pulling her skin away from her fingers, I braced myself and started watching through my hands.

After another hour of sinking lower and lower in my seat, the movie ended and I demanded a cupcake or two as a reward, and then Brian agreed to watch Chicago in the back of the truck before we went to sleep so I wouldn't have nightmares.

Now that is my kind of movie.

December 23, 2010 – The Day of Perpetual Louisiana

You'd think that Louisiana would be smaller than Texas, and I guess in fact you're right, but it sure doesn't feel that way.

We woke up late – we couldn't sleep because of that movie, and also maybe the sugar from the cupcakes and also maybe the fact that we sleep in a truck. So we

got a late start, eating some cereal along the way, and we drove towards Baton Rouge.

The highway from Lafayette to the capital is awesome – it's elevated over a river, with these great drooping trees on either side. So you look over the side and there's water! You look beyond and there's a field, drowned in a foot of reflective pools. It does get damp down here.

We drove on that neat highway, looking forward to a meal in Baton Rouge before heading off to New Orleans and our hotel, when about fifteen miles outside of town, traffic slowed way down, and then proceeded to inch along. With no end in sight, we decided to skip Baton Rouge (man, fuck that place, who needs it!), and headed on the much less interesting state highway 1 towards NOLA.

By less interesting, I mean flat. And ugly. We've been on some ugly roads, but this one is truly bad. I was surprised, considering the fact that I find the swamp sort of charmingly attractive in a sort of wet way, but this was empty fields and hideous houses, placed haphazardly one near another (what is it about these rural planners?), looking out on nothing. I mean, there were no gates, no boundaries, just strange, out of place brick houses, often on cinder blocks, strewn randomly by the side of the road next to broken down homes with ripped screens and smashed windows. Sometimes we'd come to a town, and while it was slightly more interesting than your average strip mall, it still had the various chain restaurants, and most of everything else was run down. Louisiana is one of the poorest states in the union, and it was sobering to drive along this highway, a highway which leads to a major city, and see such poverty. We also saw fires, and at first we were alarmed, but the more we saw, the more we began to think that this is some kind of controlled burn for the bettering of the fields. Or it was just the day of many spontaneous low burning high smoking fires. We got lost, got cranky, were hungry and tired and had head aches, and the day just stretched and stretched. No coffee, no food, and a bright sun.

The thing that I will say for Louisiana highways is that they are usually next to water on at least one side, and along the water there are docks and porches, and people fishing at all hours of the day. We passed a bunch of guys casting lines and cooking out, and then we passed an old lady and her off spring setting up chairs by the side of a canal.

Finally, around five in the afternoon, we arrived in New Orleans.

New Orleans is one of my favorite cities in the world. My close college friends moved here after graduation, including my best friend Hannah and her girlfriend Rachel, and I have been to visit them twice. At first, I didn't think I would like it, it being a city that isn't New York or San Francisco, but like so many of my preconceived notions, I was totally wrong. I came to New Orleans first in 2008 when I moved back East, arrived via the train called The City of

New Orleans (I'm your native son!), along a tropical bayou on a sweltering day in May. The second time, I arrived by plane for New Years, and spent the week biking and wandering around, just completely absorbing this beautiful place.

The thing that I think I like most about the city is how much it values and protects local culture. You know you're in New Orleans – you couldn't possibly be anywhere else – and that's true not just in the French Quarter but anywhere you go in the city. The Quarter is definitely beautiful, but so is The Garden District, so is Metairie. And it's not just beautiful – it has a strong cultural core. I saw the best band I've ever seen in New Orleans, in a tiny bar overflowing with people and violating fire code, and while we danced, a man painted to the music on the wall.

We arrived, exhausted, and checked into our hotel. To explain: my parents got us a hotel room for Christmas as a gift, which was a wonderful idea. It's an old hotel on the outskirts of the Quarter, near enough to the touristy stuff to be fun for a couple of days, but quiet and stately. Also, they have valet, which means we don't have to see the car for days – I love that. We got all our stuff, headed up to the room, showered, changed, and headed back out in search of food. We were so hungry, verging on desperate, but we stayed picky at least for the first block of beer soaked places until we came to a little Italian joint.

They had almost nothing left on the menu, their bathroom wasn't working, and the place seemed to be falling apart. But it had seats and there did seem to be food left, so it was fine by us. We sat, waited, and then devoured amazing fried chicken and tasty red beans and rice. We ate until we were completely full and then some, all for really cheap, and then we headed off for coffee, both of us with caffeine headaches and now about to pass out where we stood as our bodies struggled to digest our heavy food.

We stopped at the first coffee bar we found, had mediocre lattes which perked us up, then wandered around, newly awake, staring at the christmas lights draping over the wrought iron balconies. We came back to the room, finished Chicago, watched the whole of Singing in the Rain, and fell asleep so happy to finally be in New Orleans. I have been waiting for this weekend since we started planning the trip last year. I'm so glad to be back.

December 24, 2010 – The Day of Fulfilled Expectations

I think it would be fair to say that I have been waiting to get to New Orleans since long before the start of our trip, probably since we started planning. In my

head the timeline went “LA, Alaska, some driving, New Orleans!, something else, home at some point.” When it became clear that we would be in NOLA for the holidays, my heart skipped a beat. New Orleans and Christmas! A perfect combination! I can’t think of anywhere else I would rather be for the prettiest time of year that isn’t at home with my family.

We woke up early, psyched to be in a pretty hotel in fantastic city on a great holiday, and headed out to greet the day at Cafe du Monde. I’ve eaten here only once before, and while it was good and famous and all, I felt totally rushed and uncomfortable because there was a tremendous line down the street waiting. I’m not a huge fan of doing touristy things in the first place, but Brian wanted to go and I remembered their beignets and coffee as being really good even as I wolfed them down as quickly as I could, so we figured early morning would be our best bet for a pleasurable experience.

We were right. Cafe du Monde, while not exactly empty, was at least empty enough to not include a hundred hungry eyes with our meal. We had our beignets and cafe au laits in peace, watching the city wake up, and then headed out to join the world.

We both had shopping to do, so we parted ways at Jackson Square and I went to perch by the river and yelp various restaurants where we could have Christmas dinner. I picked a few, jotted down their addresses, and headed off to check out the options.

Well, the options were closed. Almost all of them. I don’t know why I had been so naive about this, but of course they were closed – this is a major holiday. As I wandered from St. Peter to Dauphine to Canal, I grew increasingly discouraged. None of my picks were open! I was starting to picture me and Brian, wandering around in our finest outfits as darkness fell, searching in vain for somewhere that would feed us a nice dinner on Christmas Eve. After about three hours of useless searching, I decided to go back to the hotel room. Clearly I was going about this all wrong. I needed to stop being picky and find out which restaurants were open in the French Quarter. I came back home and found Brian being suspicious in front of his computer. His searches had been fruitless too, and he had returned to try to find something out before heading back into the world. After he left, I found a list online of places open for the evening and started Yelping and calling. Everything was booked. I was getting frustrated, wondering what we were going to do, cursing myself for not thinking ahead more, when finally I called The Pelican Club. They were open! The menu looked really good (although at that point I didn’t really care), and they had a reservation at 9:45 – perfect. A Christmas miracle, if you will. Pleased, I headed back out with an idea of what I might want to get Brian.

I wandered over to a kitchen shop I had seen earlier, but they didn’t have what I

was looking for. Luckily, right around the corner, was a place called Kitchen Witch which specializes in used cookbooks (the kind of place my mother would love). The guy who runs it is an ex-New Yorker – he told me he had spent one too many winters in the Caribbean while in the Navy and couldn't go back. After purchasing my gift (which was actually part three of three, because I had gotten the earlier two while in Austin after stumbling on them by accident), I headed back to the hotel. On the way, I listened to people playing songs in closed off streets. There were people everywhere, but it didn't feel overly crowded. The sun was shining, and everyone seemed happy. I passed folks dressed up in Santa costumes and elf outfits, including a Santa smoking a cigar. Everywhere I went, people said hello or wished me a merry Christmas. At first I was thrown off and, like a New Yorker, on my guard. But then it occurred to me that no one was hitting on me, no one was being aggressive. They really meant it. They passed me, and so they said hello. A guy shouted it from down the street, and then smiled. A teenage girl walking with her friend said hey as we passed. What a great city.

Brian returned shortly thereafter and we headed to church. Now, just to clarify, neither Brian nor I is Christian. Not even a little bit, not even the little bit that feels obligated to go to church on serious Christian holidays. I never attended church growing up, not once, and Brian hasn't gone to church since he became an atheist. But, St. Louis Cathedral is pretty and was offering carols along with their mass, and since we aren't at home for Christmas, we wanted something that would make the holiday feel a little more Christmas-y. Plus, I love singing. So, we went to church.

The cathedral is beautiful. The mass was long, the singing was incredibly slow, but there was an organ and some drums and a boys choir and I love the theatricality of a Catholic service. All the call and response and the hand gestures and kissing the book and bowing the little Jesus to the big Jesus. I think it's fascinating. And we got to sing my favorites, even though without much heart, including Joy to the World and Silent Night. Little known fact: when I was a kid, I used to study an old carols book we had for hours each Christmas, and consequently I know every obscure verse to most traditional carols. I've been regaling Brian with them in the car for the past couple of weeks (including Oh Come All Ye Faithful in Latin with a descant on the third verse – thanks Brearley), and it was nice to culminate my "Lillian sings the holiday classics" series at St. Louis.

Afterwards, we still had a few hours until dinner, so we went back to the hotel and did some updating and some reading, and then headed out once more at 9:30. The Pelican Club is on Exchange Street on the other side of the French Quarter, so we walked beneath the balconies strewn with Christmas lights, and felt very happy and grown up. We got to Exchange, a little street near Canal, and found The Pelican Club. Our table wasn't ready, so we checked our coats and

ordered wine at the bar. When we were seated, it was in the elegant dining hall. Our server was very friendly, poor guy working on Christmas.

Brian and I ordered the prix fixe. I know he already detailed what we ate, so let me just add that it was delicious and totally worth the three days we lost off our trip because of the cost. I couldn't have asked for a nicer Christmas eve dinner unless it were my mother's bouillabaisse. Afterwards, we wandered back home, past the people lining up for midnight mass, and went to sleep in the early hours of Christmas day.

December 25, 2010 – The Day of Merriment

Merry Christmas! Happy Holidays! What a rainy day!

We awoke to the pouring rain in the early morning hours, fell back asleep and re-awoke to a gray day. But what better day to be gray than today! We had arranged our newspaper wrapped gifts on the table with a red bow tied around the ice bucket, and we headed there now to give and receive our presents. I wanted Brian to open his all at once, so we did two of mine first and then all of his and then my last one (I know, this is truly fascinating). The first two I opened were my cranes. Brian is very good at romantic and sentimental gifts, and this was no exception.

The back story: At the end of the six months I lived in San Francisco, I was sitting in a bar with my friend eating vegan buffalo wings, when we struck up a conversation with the guys at the next table. I told them I was heading back to New York, and they asked how long I had been living there and I told them, and one of the guys proceeded to build me six little multicolored cranes out of some origami paper he happened to have with him, each one representing a month of my time in SF. I love those cranes (I'm a big fan of symbolism), and I've kept them with me since then. When we set out on this trip, I decided to bring them with me, because that trip had spawned the "be a stranger" quote and I felt attached to the cranes as part of my adventurous nature. Well, of course, one of them flew out the window when we were heading into Austin and I was very sad about it.

So, Brian made me a white replacement crane. And then he made me two more to represent our two Christmases together (SYMBOLISM!!!). So after opening my pretty cranes, Brian opened his trio of gifts. The first two I had found in a fancy supermarket in Austin – a deck of cards with facts about chocolate and one with facts about cheese – and the third I had found yesterday at the cookbook shop – a book about wine and pairing wine with different foods. It's a perfect book because it's written by this woman who is the wine expert at Esquire, and

she's very low key and not obnoxious or snobby at all, very sort of laissez-faire in her pairings, giving sweeping examples rather than exact rules. Plus she has a whole section devoted to cheese, and since Brian has recently discovered the pleasure of good wine and good cheese, I figured this would be fun for him.

And then it was time for my last gift. I figured Brian had gotten me a piece of jewelry, mostly because Brian spent a good portion of the previous evening going from wrapping a gift in the bathroom to returning to the bedroom and looking morose, saying things like "I don't know if you're going to like it. I think I should have gotten the other one." Well, I am here to tell you all that he should NOT have gotten the other one. Once again, Brian was thoughtful in his gift giving. I had told him that, when I worked in a boutique in SF, we had sold jewelry by this designer named Alexis Bittar and that I had loved his stuff so much that I used to wear it in the store while I was working (pretending that it was so that I could sell them but really just so I could pretend they were mine). Brian went searching all over New Orleans for a place which sold Alexis Bittar jewelry and found it and bought me this beautiful necklace with a red pendant. It's wonderful, and it's the first piece of designer jewelry I've ever owned so I spent the morning feeling very chic. Plus, Bittar is one of Michelle Obama's favorite designers – so that makes me fashionable and awesome by association!

After donning my necklace, we went out for coffee and food and brought it back to the hotel to video chat with my family. I'd ordered gifts from etsy for my mother and father, and I was worried they weren't going to make it in time for Christmas morning, but there was my mother in her earrings and my father with his shoulder bag! We chatted for awhile, then left them to their dinner planning so that we too could figure out what we were going to eat that evening. We wanted to find a grocery store so that we could have a nice dinner at home, but alas, nothing was open. It was like a repeat of the day before, except instead of bright and sunny it was cold and windy and dark. Tourists were out, braving the weather, but all I wanted was to get back inside where it was warm. We did have help from a friendly man who pointed out potential options, but all of them were sort of liquor/convenience stores, and not exactly what we were looking for.

Eventually, after a couple of hours of wandering around in the cold, Brian and I paused in a Walgreens for some sewing material (Brian has ripped a serious hole in his jeans and has decided to sew them, which I'm really looking forward to), and happened upon their food section. We looked at each other and thought, you know what? Fuck it, and proceeded to buy pistachios, chocolate, Hawaiian bread, wheat thins and two Naked juices (for some semblance of nutrition). We paid for our convenient feast and walked back across the neighborhood, pausing to buy wine at a liquor store (which was one of many which were open, along with the bars where we saw one or two occupants per establishments steadily drinking all day in the dark). We got back to the hotel and had a little make-shift feast, while watching A Muppet Christmas Carol and Newsies (don't ask – it

seemed like a really good idea after a bottle of wine). And I was grateful for Brian and the hotel and the holiday and New Orleans.

Happy Holidays, everyone!

December 26, 2010 – The Day of Post Christmas Coasting

The day after Christmas is always a little anticlimactic. Brian loves it because all the stress of the holidays are done and you can just sort of coast into the new year. I feel more mixed about it. Usually I like it, but sometimes its the day we have to take our tree down because we have to get back to the city because my father has to work the next day, or sometimes its the day when you realize that the fun part of the winter is over and now there's another three months of gray and cold and slush until spring. Luckily, today was none of those days. Today was Sunday, and Sunday always means only one thing: New York Times crossword.

So, I donned my necklace and we headed to a little coffee shop on Frenchmen street that Brian had discovered the other day. Frenchmen is in a neighborhood on the other side of Esplanade from the French Quarter – similar architecture but definitely less touristy and booze driven. We grabbed our coffee and some breakfast items and discovered they sold the real New York Times, so we jubilantly purchased that as well, and sat to do the crossword in pen. This makes Brian nervous, mainly because I tend to be a little impetuous in my answers, not always checking everything before I ink the boxes, but today we managed to complete almost the entire thing! Then I read the magazine for awhile – it was their recounting the lives of people who died this year issue, which is always fun and occasionally depressing (this year, the award for saddest life description goes to Lynn Redgrave).

By the time we headed back to the hotel, it was late afternoon and post-Christmas malaise was setting in. We decided to take a nap, but then felt useless and so got back up. Then Brian, in his infinite good humor, decided that it was time for a date. I love dates. You might wonder what exactly qualifies as a date when you live with someone all the time. Good question, and the answer is that a date usually involves something we don't usually do – going to a nice restaurant, or going dancing, or some kind of outing that includes a couple of different events. Or it's just because we say its a date and that is what makes it so (words are powerful, you know). So, I got all excited and put back on my necklace (date necklace!) while Brian planned. He said the experience would involve drinking, food and music. We headed back out around 8:30 and over to Frenchmen Street

again, where we ended up standing in front of the Three Muses restaurant. Inside, people stood near a bar and sat at little cafe tables while a woman stood in front near the windows looking out on the street and sang with a sort of Ella Fitzgerald voice. We headed into the tiny, crowded space, ordered a couple of local beers, and stood near the bar. The Three Muses is awesome – it was started by three “professionals in hospitality, culinary and music” (quoting from their website), and they’ve created this great little cafe that feels sort of cozy and sexy, with fantastic food and music. The hostess, one of the owners (I assumed the hospitality one but upon perusing their website, I’ve discovered its the musician) was great about making sure that everyone who was standing eventually got a seat and a chance to order some food. We had lamb sliders and duck sausage pasta and chocolate cake, and I traded in my beer for a hot buttered rum on our second round. The singer performed great old jazzy standards (like “Ba Mir Bis Du Shein”, for example), accompanied by a bassist and guitarist. The whole experience was lovely and romantic and sort of perfect. It was crowded but not too crowded, and we decided that we were going to have to come back before we left New Orleans.

Afterwards, we headed back to the hotel and promptly fell asleep, as the horse drawn carriages got back to work beneath our window.

December 27, 2010 – The Day of Ending Comfort

Our last day in our hotel.

I’m sure the hoards of you who follow us avidly have been deeply disappointed by our lack of ruggedness over the past few days. I don’t blame you. But give us a break – it’s Christmas. And a few days after Christmas...

The day was actually so incredibly uninteresting that I can barely remember what happened after twenty-four hours. But here goes.

We woke up and promptly went back to our new favorite coffee shop on Frenchmen Street – Cafe Rose Nicaud, where we worked until late afternoon. I am feverishly attempting to finish my applications, a process which is by turns infuriating and terrifying. When our work day was done, we headed back to the restaurant where we’d had our first meal on Thursday night – Fiorella’s, where they were once again out of the soup I wanted to try. So we had some red beans and rice and fried chicken again, all of which was delicious.

Then it was back to the hotel with a bottle of wine. It was Brian’s turn to choose a movie, and since I had forced him to watch Newsies, he retaliated with another

terrible Christian Bale movie. To be fair, it's not Bale's fault – I think he's great. But he does have a knack for terrible scripts. The Prestige just totally pissed me off at the end – what a cheat! Plus Scarlett Johansson gets on my nerves, and Scarlett Johansson trying and failing to do a British accent was like scraping my teeth on tin foil. But we both agreed it was just payment for Murder on the Orient Express (a movie I adore but which Brian thinks is a total cop out). Afterwards, it was my turn again and since I seem to have taken it upon myself to introduce Brian to every movie musical of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, we continued our journey with An American in Paris. And then we fell asleep.

And so ended our stay in the Hotel Provincial.

December 28, 2010 – The Day of Readjustment

Today started out poorly.

I was determined to submit my applications today, at least to two schools, so that I can stop thinking about them and enjoy my new year. Well, as I was preparing to hit the Submit button, I decided to just double check about the length of my five page essay – was that five pages single or double spaced? Turns out, five pages is only for a PhD applicants. I am not a PhD applicant, and it in fact says EVERYWHERE that my personal statement essay should only be one page.

This was disturbing for a number of reasons:

- 1) I have to rewrite an essay in a couple of days that I have spent months working on
- 2) It's the essay I like the most out of everything I'm submitting to schools
- 3) WHAT ELSE HAVE I FUCKED UP?!

So, after a brief but violent breakdown, I managed to steady myself long enough to help Brian pack up our room and check out in time. We decided that the morning called for beignets, but when we meandered over – with me cursing myself the whole time – to Cafe du Monde, we discovered a crazy line, far too long for a couple of beignets and some decent coffee. So we headed over to the other beignet joint that had decent reviews on Yelp – Cafe Beignet. The atmosphere was awful – tourists loudly talking and spreading powdered sugar everywhere, waiters shouting numbers as orders came out, and no where really to sit. So after a fairly long wait (although, I have to believe, shorter than du

Monde), Brian and I received our paper bag full of fried dough and promptly left for a more pleasant eating environment in the form of Jackson Square.

Well, those beignets were delightful. The coffee was fine. The park was lovely. And I felt much better than I had earlier in the morning.

We wandered through the French Quarter back over towards our favorite coffee shop outside the neighborhood. The streets were packed with tourists, and it made me miss the comparatively quiet days around Christmas, when Brian and I pretty much had the neighborhood to ourselves. The visitors were slow walking and loud talking, and they were everywhere. The sidewalks in New Orleans are not big enough for all the people who hang out there, but I guess not all of them have walk-rage like I (and most New Yorkers) do. It made me glad we had stayed there over the weekend, and glad that we would be moving to the residential area of town that evening.

We successfully navigated to the other side of Esplanade and ended up lying down in Washington Park, while kids played with their new toys and parents threw a frisbee to an extremely eager dog. As the sugar coma set in, Brian suggested taking a nap in the back of the car, and I was all game, until I realized I wouldn't be able to sleep because I'd be too stressed about my essays. So, jealous, I wished him a happy nap, and went to go fix my application.

It actually wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. It took a few hours, but wasn't a complete disaster. Eventually, Brian joined me and we worked until closing. Then, it was time to venture to a new territory.

Well, new for this trip. I've stayed with my friends in New Orleans twice before, and while they've moved houses, they've stayed in the same neighborhood – Tremé. It's an absolutely beautiful area – grand historic houses line Esplanade on the way north to Mid-City and the park, trees hang over the roads and little coffee shops and markets dot the area.

Phil, Joanna and Austin live with another roommate in this house off Esplanade, with a shared porch and a basement. The house is filled with stenciled paintings and the corresponding paper cut outs, spray painted on red paper or framed wood. Handmade furniture and art is everywhere – bookshelves propped at weird angles and a door frame with glass and painted birds, a shelf made from a plank of wood hung high above, desks with writing etched into the wood and books everywhere. I love their house – I love that they have communal food in the fridge and mason jars in the cabinets and potting jars filled with dirt on tables made from slabs of wood and saw horses. I always feel so lucky that I got to go to college with a group of smart, arty kids who changed how I thought and talked about theater. I'm so excited that Brian gets to meet them.

But not tonight. Phil is gone until the first, Joanna and Austin would be back

tomorrow night, Hannah back on Thursday. Rachel was sick, but I assume we'll see here when Hannah gets back into town. Until then, we were on our own. We went and got some food at the local market, then hunkered down and read until the other roommate came home. She hadn't been living here the last time I was here (Hannah hadn't moved in with Rachel yet and was living in the room Austin now occupied, and Austin was down in the basement), so we introduced ourselves and chatted for awhile about the state of theater in New York and New Orleans. Then she headed off to bed and we headed off to Austin's room to usurp his bed and floor.

December 29, 2010 – The Day of Daily Life, New Orleans

Well, that might be a bit of stretch. But it was nice to be out of a hotel and into the city.

We woke up and had some of our oatmeal – it should give you a sense of how infrequently we've been able to make oatmeal that we bought this bulk pack back when the trip started and have take three months to get through it. Then, Brian went for a haircut – a haircut he's been talking about for weeks – while I worked on my apps. When he got home, we fed the cats, read for a bit, and then ventured out.

The sky was turning gray but it wasn't nearly as cold as its been. So we drove up to City Park at the top of Esplanade, parked and went for a stroll. We meandered under drooping trees, literally dripping with vines and leaves, past the ubiquitous egret or two, and a black swan (BLACK SWAN – aaaahhhh). We walked on these cool, cobbled bridges, tiny bridges made of broken stone, to little dead end islands. We passed brides having their pictures taken and flocks of birds being fed by hapless tourists. We walked all along this beautiful swampy lake, and then back to the edge of the park, as people played before the coming rain storm. We found ourselves hungry at that late afternoon hour, so yelped a place for some lunch and came up with Parkway Bakery and Tavern, a mile away.

So we walked along the ambling river, crossing it a few times because I was confused as to which side we were supposed to be on (not the best navigator in the world...). We made it, this little stand in the middle of a slightly run down residential neighborhood, and went in.

Po' Boys. I love them, and they are making me fat. But that's ok – it's the holidays (at least, that's what I keep telling myself). We grabbed a roast beef and

a sausage po' boy as well as some root beers and some sweet potato fries at this apparent NOLA institution, and let me tell you, they were great. And sloppy and messy. And great. And so was the place – you got the feeling that locals and tourists frequent this spot. We sat as our food digested and watched football on TV. Then we left and took a much less winding route back to our car, through pretty streets and back along the river to our car.

Joanna and Austin were due back that evening, but not until late, so we had some time to kill. We read for a bit back at the house and dutifully fed the cats. Then, we headed out for a great adventure, courtesy of Mr. Andrich.

The Lakers were in town playing the Hornets, and Brian wanted to head over to the Arena and scalp ourselves some cheap seats. We parked over near Frenchmen and walked at a New Yorker pace through crowds of tourists on haunted house tours, and into the empty downtown. On the way, we passed our buddy who had tried to help us find a supermarket on Christmas Day, and he said hello even though he didn't recognize us, which is, of course, what I love about this city. Eventually we made it to the sports complex, and it was packed. We had forty dollars for two tickets, and figured we could wait out the scalpers but after an hour it became clear that tickets were never going to get that cheap for this sold out game.

The wind had picked up, so we left and headed back across town, figuring that tonight was a perfect night to revisit our new favorite little restaurant/jazz bar, Three Muses. We went, had some wine, had far too much food, and listened to a piano, a guitar, a drum, a trombone and a trumpet play some old great (Mack the Knife, Saints Come Marching In).

When the band was done at ten, we took a stroll along the crowded streets of the French Quarter, along the river and then back up and over to our car along Dauphine. Along the way, we passed Bourbon Street – what a mad house! It's a pity that that's what people think of when they think of NOLA – there's so much more to it than that drunk street. I mean, they'd closed the whole street off to traffic and the road was filled with people bar hopping – it was like a holiday or a party, but it was just a Wednesday night. Not my scene at all.

We drove back over to the house, where we found Selena making up a bed for us in the basement, and Joanna upstairs having just returned home. We chatted for a little while and caught up a bit, and then we all went to our respective beds. In the middle of the night, Austin returned home via the side basement door, and an hour or so later the cats escaped into the basement so Brian and I had to perform a cat exorcism in the dark. After that, the rain started, and poured all night, hard, and on into the morning.

December 30, 2010 – The Day of Vassar Reunited

We awoke to the sounds of a house awake. Selena and Joanna left early, then one of them returned, ran upstairs to retrieve something, and then came back down and left. I had slept poorly, so it wasn't like I was woken up, exactly, but it wasn't like I was well rested either. After another hour of desperate attempts at sleep, Brian and I finally resigned to our fate and got up to see if Austin was upstairs.

He was. We came upstairs and heard him scolding the cat in his room. I have been really excited for Brian and Austin to meet – I think they have similar senses of humor and I thought that they would get along. Plus, Brian hadn't yet met any of my male Vassar friends, and I figured Austin was probably as excellent an introduction as their is.

We sat and chatted, caught up. I haven't seen Austin since I came to NOLA for New Years two years ago, so there was a fair amount to discuss. Austin is currently unemployed – the theater he was working for was sold recently so everyone got laid off – which is sad for him but good for me because it means that we get to hang out. As we sat eating oatmeal and chatting, Hannah (who had been up since four and newly arrived via plane from her native Massachusetts) swung by on her way to work, thoroughly cracked out from lack of sleep but wonderful all the same. We made plans for that evening after she got out of rehearsal, and then she rushed off dutifully to work. After she left, we all decided to head over to the local coffee shop Fair Grinds to do a little work, and Austin promised to read and edit my essays, which is great because up until that point the only person who had helped me with them was my mother. Don't get me wrong: my mother is a fantastic editor, but she is not a theater person, and I needed confirmation from someone in the field that my essays made sense.

So we wandered up the beautiful, broad Esplanade to Fair Grinds, over where Hannah, Phil and Joanna lived their first year in New Orleans. Fair Grinds is a great coffee shop, with books and magazines and pictures and brightly painted walls and a patio. And free wi-fi, of course. Austin worked on my essays, I read Austin's play and gave him notes, Brian worked on the FullStop website and we all felt accomplished after about four or five hours.

We left Fair Grinds as night was falling and headed to the market next door for dinner ingredients. I've been reading the book I got for Brian about wine and food with particular relish, envisioning nights spent trying different combinations in our fantasy Brooklyn apartment, and I had recently gotten to the blurbs about using wine for sauces. Since we had a little wine left over, and I was feeling adventurous, we decided to try out a wine pasta sauce with mushrooms and peppers and onions and tomatoes. Austin is a huge fan of pasta.

Let me clarify: Austin is a huge fan of dried, uncooked pasta, usually consumed by the pound. It sounds weird, and in fact is weird, but sort of fascinating at the same time, and anyway attests to his enjoyment of the food in all its many edible and barely edible forms, so it seemed like a good bet all around. We bought the ingredients, and trekked back to the house.

Let me take a moment to say that it is wonderful not sitting in our car all the time. New Orleans is a gloriously walkable city.

We got back and cooked up what may be the best pasta dish I've ever had a hand in. Joanna and Selena came home and each had a bowl, and of course there was wine. Then, Austin, Brian and I left and walked the mile or so to the Quarter to visit a little bar called Pravda, where Austin's friend the Scottish bartender was working.

We walked under the highway and into Treme, and then to the busy, touristy streets of the Quarter. One of the nicest aspects about NOLA, I think, is that while the tourists are loud and rowdy and there expressly to get drunk, they tend to stick to this one part of town. That being said, it was the part of town to which we were now headed, so I was a little concerned that we would end up in one of those skeezy bars along Decatur where scantily clad bartenders sold neon colored drinks by the gallon.

Well, I should have had more faith. We did end up on Decatur, but it was to a well decorated hole in the wall bar with Russian overtones and \$2 Miller High Lifes. Not only was the bar moderately empty, but there was a completely empty courtyard in the back with little cafe tables. New Orleans had warmed up significantly since the cold front on Christmas, and the weather was practically balmy. The three of us sat outside until Joanna arrived on her bike, and shortly thereafter, Hannah and Rachel.

Hannah, my best friend and constant artistic companion in college, was valiant for venturing out after no sleep, a plane ride, a full day of work and a three hour rehearsal, but there she was with a beer, which I really appreciated. We all sat and chatted for awhile, and after a few beers decided that now was the time for Tatertachos.

That's right. Nachos made out of tater tots. That is, tater tots, cheese, salsa, sour cream, jalapenos. It is a beautiful thing, and I've only ever had it in New Orleans at this bar on Frenchmen, and have been eagerly awaiting the time when we could all have it once more. Sure, I could have made it at home extremely easily. Sure, I could have spent the last year in a state of low brow culinary bliss. But the fact that I have abstained made the excitement almost palpable.

As we were preparing to leave Pravda, a man came up and stood extremely close to me, and as I turned around to tell him to step back, I looked at his face and his

mouth opened into a wide O of surprise and delight. It was Andrew. I dutifully and drunkenly splashed my beer all over him when I hugged him and brought him over to meet Brian. Andrew is my friend from NTI, who is from Louisiana and has made a theatrical life for himself in New Orleans after graduating Tulane. The theater community in the city is small and so all of my friends know each other at least to a certain extent, which makes hanging out with everyone much easier for me.

We all left together, with Andrew's two friends (couch surfers) in tow, and headed for Frenchmen. There, we ordered our Tatertachos and after waiting a surprisingly long time, they arrived, as wonderful as I remembered them.

By the time we headed home, I was properly drunk. I didn't realize I had had so much to drink, but it occurred to me in a haze that I had also consume about 3/4 of a bottle of wine with dinner, and that might have been what pushed me over the edge. Rachel was still sober, so luckily she drove us all back to the house. We said our goodnights and went to bed for one of those uneasy, besotted sleeps.

December 31, 2010 – The Day of The End of 2010

Hannah and Rachel were headed to a wedding in Texas for the weekend, and had generously offered us their abode while they were gone. So the plan was to wake up and wander over there around 11 so that Hannah could show us the ins and outs of the house and give us a key.

That's what was supposed to happen. What actually happened was that Brian and I woke up around 6am terribly hungover. Like the kind of hungover where you can't get back to sleep and you feel sort of nauseous and your head hurts and you make all kinds of promises about never drinking again. I never had hangovers like these when I was in college. Actually, I never had hangovers at all. I was never a heavy drinker, but I certainly drank as much as I did last night, and yet I always woke up feeling peppy and ready for more. I mentioned this to Brian, eyes closed, and together we contemplated our aging bodies and our disgruntled livers and considered the fact that TONIGHT and not last night is the biggest drinking night of the year.

Let me take this moment, while Brian and I are fighting our hangover, to say that 2010 was a red letter year. Between FullStop's first full season and living in Venice CA, Brian and I ending our long distance and starting our long anticipated pilgrimage, this has been a really exciting and fulfilling 365 days. So I want to pause on this, the last day of the year, to say Thank You 2010, you've

been a blast.

Around 8, when it was becoming increasingly clear that we were not headed back to sleep any time soon, we pulled ourselves out of bed and went out into the humid air for some coffee and bagels. The walk, not to mention the caffeine and starch, helped tremendously.

Hannah pushed our meeting back to 12 which was great because we needed the extra time to sit. Hannah and Rachel live a couple blocks away from Fair Grinds, further up Esplanade than Phil, Joanna and Austin. We wandered over there and I was reminded of one of the many reasons why Hannah and I have remained so close for so long. Hannah is easily as neurotic as I am, which I love because there are few people who understand my particular brand of “is the door locked? let me check five times” anxiety. We walked through the house as Hannah explained how the windows opened and closed, how the space heaters worked, the way to lock the door – and the fact is that if she hadn’t gone through all that trouble, I probably would have been calling her constantly to try to figure out if I was doing it right. It made me so happy to be with her again, so happy to have Brian meet one of my best friends in the world, and to see part of why we understand each other.

And it made me really happy that she was letting us stay in her house. Their apartment is beautiful! They live in a little unit inside a larger house, with big floor to ceiling windows exiting out onto the porch and shutters which let light in through green slats. The walls are painted variously dark blue or light blue or white, and they have a lovely enormous kitchen. It struck me how much nicer my friends houses were than any NYC apartment I’ve ever been in.

Brian and I left, key in hand, returning to the other house for our stuff. I texted Andrew and asked if he wanted to come hang out while we moved over to Hannah and Rachel’s and he agreed to bike over shortly. When we got back to the house, we discovered Austin upstairs and the three of us hung out for another hour or so until Andrew showed up. Then we all headed over to drop our stuff and then Austin, Brian and I took the car and Andrew his bike, and we all went down to the Quarter for lunch. Well, actually, we went to the Bywater, but the place we were planning to go was closed so we parked and wandered over to Camellia Grill for burgers (well, Andrew had a vegetarian omelette...being a vegetarian. I actually don’t know how my friends do it – Phil, Joanna, Andrew, Hannah – all vegetarians. In NOLA. If that’s not the definition of commitment, I don’t know what is).

We parted ways after that, as the evening was falling. We took Austin back in the car to his house, but not before we paused to check out a Banksy on Rampart. Banksy, for those of you who don’t know, is a graffiti artist based in London who makes these stenciled works that are usually poignant, often political, and

always really beautiful. I found out about through Phil and Austin the summer after graduating college, and in the past few years, Austin has gotten really into stenciling, creating his own and storing spray paint in his room, which is completely awesome. I have as the background on my phone a Banksy from LA where he painted over the ING in a giant PARKING sign, and then stenciled a girl on a swing tied to the A. I told the kid I babysat for this past year about Banksy and he was totally into it and we spent an afternoon searching for Banksy's in New York, but only found a tiny stenciled rat wearing an apron and sweeping at the bottom of a light post – most of the other ones have been painted over. This Banksy that Austin showed us I had actually seen the first time I was in NOLA, but I was glad to have the chance to see it again. It's a girl standing under an umbrella with her hand sticking out to check for rain, but it's actually raining gray paint from the underside of the umbrella. It's beautiful, and very sad. The picture has plexiglass over it to protect it from being painted over, and we stood and stared at it for a little bit before heading back to the house.

We dropped Austin off and headed over to Hannah and Rachel's to pass out before New Years. Actually, Brian passed out. I usually need about two hours in order to ensure that I actually am able to fall asleep at all and rest. So I stayed up and read while Brian slept, and then around ten we headed back out to Austin's. Joanna had headed out earlier in the day to a farm four hours away in rural Louisiana. She didn't really know the people who owned the farm or most of the people who would be there or even really the people who were driving her, but if there's one person who can take a situation like that and not make it terrifying it's Joanna, so we had lent her our sleeping bag with promises to come look for her if she didn't return the next day. So it was Austin, Brian and I, setting off after a beer to celebrate the New Year.

Austin had asked earlier if we wanted to swing by Bourbon Street or just go over towards Frenchmen, which would be comparatively quiet. Brian and I are not really into large stupidly drunken tourist crowds, so we had opted for Frenchmen. On our way over, however, Austin was like "So, we could go to Frenchmen, or, you know, we could stop on Bourbon for a beer" and the timbre of his voice suggested that this was his desire. So I told him we could do whatever he wanted, and we headed over towards Bourbon Street.

I'm so glad we did. I had never seen anything like it. Drunken folks, who had been drinking since we had gone for our late afternoon lunch, pushed their way through the crowded streets. Girls in heels and guys in hats and party glasses, all of them wearing beads and carrying neon drinks or plastic cups of beer, were shouting and partying down as music blared from all the bars. One, two, three stories up from the street, people stood on balconies laden down with beads, throwing them down to the people gathered below, sometimes shouting "show us your tits!" and I'm convinced I saw a couple of women comply but Austin and Brian claim they didn't. There was live music and piped music and the streets,

still wet from the rainstorms of the past few days, were mucky with alcohol and probably piss as well. And it was all colored lights and glazed over eyes, and I had actually never seen anything like it. I mean, New York's Times Square can get crazy on New Years, but there are police and order and a purpose – the ball drop is the reason everyone is there, and they're not aloud to drink on the street while they wait in the freezing cold. Here, the booze was the point, and the party that would last until midnight and then well beyond. It was wild, and totally fascinating to see a place live up to its reputation like that.

We skirted the crowds and the bars spilling out with people and ended up in a little bar on a side street, where we grabbed three beers and “to-go” cups and then headed back out to Bourbon Street with our drinks. We walked a few more blocks, slowly making our way down the center of the street, and then careened off down a side street and made our way back over to Frenchmen. The bars on Frenchmen were charging covers, but we managed to find one called the Apple Barrel that was relatively empty and free. We got a couple of Abita's and stood while a band comprised of middle aged men struck up a few songs. They were awesome, actually, and the music was toe-tapping, and there was a kid who couldn't have been much older than 21 if that with a bottle of champagne in his hand and a hat on his head swinging away, dancing like he was in his room with a huge smile on his face and he became my new favorite person. The bathroom was coed and there was a line, but I made a couple of friends with the girls ahead of me who were concerned about the potential revolting state of the wc. One of them complimented me on my hair – the way I put it up with pins – which I really appreciated, since I always feel slightly self conscious about it. The bathroom, when I finally got there, wasn't as horrible as had been predicted, but I got out of there fast and rejoined the boys.

Around 11:30, we left to head to the Mississippi for fireworks. We walked down Frenchmen and then over the tracks and as we came to the place where the buildings stopped and the riverfront started, we saw fog literally pouring out over the tracks and into the city. We walked into the haze, barely able to see, and found a couple of places to sit on the rocks leading down to the water. We sat and watched the fireworks, barely visible, going off all over the city, down the river and across the water, and as the barge that was to be our own explosive carrier tugged slowly into view, a warm wind came and blew an opening in the fog. The change was so breathtaking that everyone in the crowd gasped and said “oh wow,” then the fog came back and then went away again and each time was more and more beautiful. The bridge glowed and then, without any count down, the fireworks started and it was midnight. We cheered and called Happy New Year and the conservatives next to us made fun of environmentalists and Obama but I was too pleased to care. The fireworks were excellent, and at the end, when they hit the finale and all the explosions went off one right after another, the smoke mixed with the fog so that it was actually impossible to see anything other than our hands in front of us. Then it was over and we cheered again.

Then the mass exodus, as everyone and their mother headed back to Bourbon Street to keep the party going. We, on the other hand, passed Bourbon and headed to what Austin termed “the only neighborhood bar in the French Quarter” which was pretty empty and still had an open kitchen. We got burgers and fries and a couple more beers, and one of the off-duty workers, this middle aged woman, took a shine to Austin and followed him around, turning to me and saying “I just had to come over here, he’s so cute.”

We ate our burgers, and then walked back to Austin’s, where we high fived the New Year and then Brian and I went back to Hannah and Rachel’s to sleep.

It was an excellent end to an excellent year.

January 1st, 2011 – The Day of the New Year

Happy New Year!

New Years Day is always more fun for me than New Year’s Eve. Everything feels possible and clean and, if you haven’t worn yourself out the night before, the coming year seems really beautiful. That said, it doesn’t hurt to have a great New Years Eve, and I’m pretty sure that last night qualified.

We started 2011 with breakfast. Brian and I love to cook, and whenever we have a stove at our disposal we take advantage of it. So we went to the nearby store, bought some eggs and cheese and salsa and potatoes, grabbed some coffee, and came home to make some breakfast tacos just like Juan and a Million. If you are skeptical of our ability to do this, let me tell you right now: we succeeded! We made a couple of seriously excellent egg filled tortillas, combining our potatoes with onions and eggs and cheese until it formed a gooey mass. The salsa we bought was really top notch too, which didn’t hurt.

After that, the day was quiet. I submitted one of my apps, which was incredibly nerve wracking and then an unmitigated relief. Hannah had read my essays the night before on her way to the wedding and had offered necessary advice, which I employed well, I hope. After that, I read in the room for awhile, still trying to slog my way through *The Satanic Verses*. It’s a great book, and beautiful at that, but it is way dense.

It was really nice to spend the day at Hannah and Rachel’s. Their house, as I’ve mentioned before, is great. I think my favorite thing though is their bookshelf. They have this bookshelf in the living room where we would be sleeping on a pull out futon couch, and as I perused their titles I discovered that the whole case was organized into categories, each of which perfectly encapsulated their passions. There was feminist and queer theory, tomes on the issues and history of race and

privilege, books on leftist politics, and of course plays and dramatic criticism. I was never able to get through most of the books we had to read at Vassar for our major, with Brecht and Artaud being just outside the scope of my understanding and patience, and so although I got the basic points, I was never much of a theatrical scholar – Hannah on the other hand not only read the readings, she understood them and could talk about them and employ them. It pleased me no end to see our old texts in her bookshelf, and it made me even more excited for Hannah to return the following day so that she and Brian could spend some time together.

We texted Austin and told him we had some salsa and beans and that we'd be happy to come over and make dinner, to which we received an enthusiastic affirmation. So around six, we headed back over to their house, beans and salsa and brown rice in tow, and there we found Joanna, mercifully returned from the wilds, and Phil, which was exciting. I was generally pleased that Brian got to meet Austin and Phil, since he really doesn't know any of my guy friends from Vassar, and I spent most of my time at school with these two, making plays and arguing over design or directing decisions. Phil and Joanna were making collard greens and black eyed peas, apparently good luck on New Years Day. Actually, the collard greens were kale, but I mean it's all green and good for you, right? We made our beans and rice and Austin added corn and then we sat down for a really excellent dinner. Phil had gotten balloon animals for Christmas, so he attempted to make one, and then I attempted to make one and it exploded on me, which I didn't like, and Joanna told us a camping story when she was with Phil and their friend and she had gone outside the tent and seen something watching her and had gone back to the tent and screamed and then shushed Phil when he had woken up and started yelling.

After dinner, we hung out a little while longer until, exhausted, we headed back to the house and crashed. That's what I call a good New Year: friends, food, and a lack of activity. Again, Happy 2011 everyone!

January 2, 2011- The Day the Saints Go Marching at Home

We woke up late. We hadn't slept well. This is becoming a theme of our time in NOLA.

We grabbed some coffee and called Austin. We had plans to watch the Saints game at a bar of Austin's choosing nearby. We took our coffee with us and walked along the Bayou to the Parkview Tavern (different from the other Parkview where we had Po' Boys). This Parkview was dark and dive-y with \$7

pitchers which got you four beers and.... drum roll... free food. That's right. Buffet style free food, with chili dogs and chips and cheesecake. Saints paraphernalia everywhere, hanging fleur de lis, tvs in every corner. Austin is quickly becoming a bar connoisseur in my eyes.

The game started at noon. The bar quickly filled with smoke and cheering and booing and clapping. It never got really crowded and it always felt friendly and fun, like the neighborhood was all hanging out in someone's living room. Someone's very dark, beer-filled living room. The Saints lost, but we all had about four Abita Ambers a piece, so it wasn't quite so devastating. I think I have officially become a Saints fan.

We left around 3:30 and walked a couple of blocks over to City Park to meander around the sculpture garden. I came here two years ago with Austin and Hannah and Joanna, and it was still as cool as I remembered it. The giant Bourgeois spider was still there, and the beads hanging in the trees. It's a great garden.

On our way back down Esplanade, Hannah called. She had returned home and was unpacking. Austin headed home and we headed back to their house to help them unpack. Hannah had plans to go to a potluck that evening, so we decided to tag along. Until then we spent a quiet couple of hours reading and hanging out.

We left, picked up Austin, and headed over to the potluck in I think the Bywater. Phil and Joanna took their bikes. We arrived a short while later at another beautiful brightly painted apartment – my impression of NOLA real estate continues to shine. We stood around, ate some really excellent vegetarian food (all these vegetarians! It's amazing!), and then after a bit, headed over to a bar next door. We sat around and recounted various Vassar stories for Brian, which he seemed to enjoy, as he got to know me in the context of my friends. We told the one about the disaster that was "Company" and the experience of "He Who Says Yes" we talked about Woodshed and the department, and generally had one of those great recounting experiences that you can only have with good friends from college.

Rachel had stayed at the party and arrived a short while later, and then we all headed out, dropping Austin off and returning back to the apartment, where we fell asleep earlier than usual – probably around midnight. Oh, the New Orleans life.

January 3, 2011 – The Day of the American South

I'd like to say right now that hanging out with Austin every day has been really

cool.

I've seen Austin for at least a couple of hours every day since we left our hotel, and it has been really great to catch up and hang out like we did in school. Austin and I had a fairly contentious theatrical relationship, where we would fight for hours about the choices we made in Woodshed, about the other one's acting and directing ideas, and about our theories on performance and how they translated to our work. We would fight in rehearsal, much to everyone else's chagrin, and afterwards, sometimes standing on the stairwell of our dorm until 2 in the morning after everyone else had left rehearsal behind, arguing about why one idea was better than another. Sometimes it was more than arguing – sometimes we would really fight, yelling at each other, me crying and getting hysterical, while everyone waited in the design studio for us to resolve. Contentious actually might be a light word for our theatrical relationship. But that is not to say it wasn't also fulfilling. That's how we both communicate, and it was for me a relief to know that I could speak my mind and get aggressive in rehearsal and that Austin, instead of taking it personally or feeling like I was too intense, would step up and push back. And I think it was the same for him. And in that way, as frustrating as those rehearsals could be, they also taught both of us a great deal about what we valued artistically, and gave us a chance to express ourselves in a way that was comfortable for us. Since then, my artistic associations have been far less aggressive, but in many ways I have had to curb my own natural argumentative tendencies. That's good in some ways. But in others, I still miss being able to fight for what I believe and knowing that someone will be right there, fighting right back at me.

Austin and I haven't done a show together in over three years. But I think we both still retain a respect and understanding for the way the other one expresses themselves. And I always look forward to seeing him, and, as I said before, it's really cool that we've been able to hang out so much this visit.

Today, I woke up in the early dawn atrociously thirsty. I mean, devastatingly thirsty. So thirsty I had to swallow a bunch of times to feel like my throat wasn't coated in goo. Unfortunately, the room we're staying in is right next to Hannah and Rachel's, and in order to get to the kitchen I'd have to walk through their room first. This, I'm sure, would not have been a problem for them, but I couldn't bring myself to disturb them, especially when they both had work in the morning. So I sucked it up – literally – and waited until morning. They got up pretty early, and we joined them, moving around so they wouldn't feel like they had to stay quiet. Before Hannah went to work, we made plans to get lunch, and then we showered and chatted with Rachel. We were going to get some more eggs to use up the last of our amazing salsa, and when I offered some to Rachel, she informed me that she had become a vegan. I am constantly amazed by my friends from school. A VEGAN? Wow, I was impressed, especially because until she became a vegan, Rachel was an omnivore, who changed because of what she

learned about the meat industry and the inherent issues with eating any animal products in this country. I agree, and sometimes I wish I were vegan. But I don't think I could do it.

Hannah came back to pick up Rachel for work, and we hung out for a little while until around 1 when we went over to Hannah's Mid City office to pick her up for lunch. Hannah has been working for the Fair Housing office in New Orleans since moving down there – so about three and a half years now, which blows my mind. Hannah has always been an activist – we used to get into arguments about whether theater has the potential to be politically effective, and the theater she does now tends to have activist messages, especially about the inequities and prejudices inherent in our schooling system. All this while holding down a full time job. She and her company just produced a children's book about discrimination in housing practices called *The Fair Housing Five*, which I read while at her house – it's excellent.

We met her and went for Middle Eastern food, a safe bet for vegetarians anywhere. Rachel came and joined us and we chatted for about an hour and then walked her back to work. She had rehearsal that night but we all agreed to go out after that. Then we drove over to pick up Austin to head over to the WWII museum.

Brian, like my father, has a thing for WWII. He finds it fascinating – the history, the military history, the political situation it arose from. I'm not as thrilled by it, but I figured I'd enjoy the museum. We got there and discovered, to our dismay, that tickets were \$18 for adults. Both Austin and I have our student IDs from Vassar (thank you, Vassar, for not inscribing our graduation dates), but I had left mine back at the house and anyway that didn't help Andrich, so we opted out.

Luckily, there are four other museums in the immediate vicinity of the WWII museum. I am of the opinion that all museums should be within walking distance of each other, so that you can museum hop the way one might bar hop. Or, so you can alter plans easily in case your first choice doesn't pan out. Or your second – we wandered over to the CAC and found it closed. So we went to the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

It was excellent. And it only cost five dollars! The art is mostly contemporary. I was a big fan of Benny Andrews, and Brian dug the Justin Forbes, and there was a really great collection of photographs from this neighborhood as they rebuilt after Katrina. We wandered around for an hour, and then left for happy hour.

I know. I know. I have clearly been drinking a serious amount while here. But let me say this: It's not as much as you think, and also it's the holidays and also I am probably never going to drink again after this. Well, maybe not that last part, but definitely not for a while. And besides, the real reason we were going to happy hour at the WWII restaurant American Sector was not for the \$2.50 beers

(although that was nice) but the .75 sloppy joe sliders. I had three and they were incredible.

We went back to Austin's, where Joanna and Phil were hanging out, and decided to play a game of poker, dealer's choice. Brian actually knows how to play poker, but the rest of us did fairly well. Well, actually, I didn't. I lost, and had to be dealt back in, but that was OK because we were playing with pistachios and soy nuts.

Andrew arrived and joined the game, and while he didn't entirely understand the concept of bluffing (neither do I), he still managed to sweep a couple of hands. After a few rounds we switched games and Brian taught us something called Presidents and Assholes, which in my opinion was more fun and no betting. Best part is that the President gets to make rules. Austin won the first few rounds and decided that meant I couldn't say any words with the letter e. After that, I aggressively rooted for him to lose, and it was like we'd never graduated. Andrew left and Joanna joined. Joanna, it turns out, is a shark. I'm not surprised – if any of my friends were going to shark me, I would have assumed it would be Joanna. It was amazing – she actually won every single round. Not like, barely won. Won outright, long before any of us had even considered the possibility of winning. It was crazy and ridiculous and great. We played until Rachel came by, and then Brian and I said our goodbyes to Phil and Joanna and left to go to Camellia Grill with Austin, Rachel and Hannah.

Brian and I had our last indulgent meal – cheese fries, onion rings and a milkshake. Then we headed back to drop Austin off, and he told us he had a gift for us.

It was one of the most awesome gifts I'd ever received. Upon learning that Austin stenciled, Brian had tried to convince him to go out that evening and graffiti, half kidding the way that Brian is sort of kidding but also actually wants to do it. So Austin, knowing how much we admired his stencils, had created a stencil for us – a BEASTRANGER STENCIL. Yes folks, that's right. It's awesome. He gave us the stencil itself, an example of the stencil on poster board, and some black spray paint. Stay tuned for a stenciled beastranger nation. Thank you Austin – coolest gift ever.

We went back to the house and, after chatting to Rachel and Hannah for a bit, went to sleep, ready to leave New Orleans in the morning. 12 days. What a great place.

January 4, 2011 – The Day of Goodbye NOLA

We've been here for twelve days. And now it's time to say goodbye.

We woke up early, as has been our wont the past week, and dried our laundry (smoke in bars will get in your clothes and make you feel dirty every day – so glad that New York passed that law a decade ago. Get with the program, southern states!). Then we packed up, said goodbye to Hannah and Rachel, reorganized our car and headed East towards Mississippi.

We drove straight through Mississippi, actually. I was sort of sorry, but we're on a stricter time line and budget than we've been since about mid-November, so the state of Mississippi is a sacrifice we'll just have to make.

We drove into Alabama and up to Mobile, a place I never thought I would go to. I guess there have been a lot of stops like that on this trip.

I passed out promptly upon arrival, once we pulled up to Carpe Diem, a little coffee shop. Days of debauchery (well, by Brian's and my 10pm bedtime standards) have taken their toll on me. I've sworn off alcohol and meat for a bit while my body recuperates. I've also started to question my eating habits, but more on that in a later post. For now, I settled for a nap while Brian headed in and worked.

I actually just took an hour to sit in the car, read the times on my phone and just be alone for a bit. It's very stressful to introduce a significant other to your friends, especially the ones you know all the way back from college. So Brian and I both were in need of a little space, and I'm perfectly happy to have the back of the truck to myself for a little while.

After my nap, I was feeling sort of groggy and down, so I got Brian and we went and got some cheese and bread, ate in the supermarket parking lot, and then headed back to the outskirts of town to watch a movie. It was Brian's turn. He chose Old School. I get next.

January 5, 2011 – The Day of Going from A to B

It was one of those days.

We woke up and returned to Carpe Diem to do some work. I reread my other application essay and realized the last paragraph sucked and so I started reworking it. I was sort of hoping I would be able to submit everything today, but alas, no dice.

After a few hours, Brian and I left the coffee shop in order to print out some of my supplemental stuff to send. We went to a Fed Ex on the strip by the highway,

and while we were able to print out the documents, the photos wouldn't take. Frustrated after four or five tries, we left and went to Staples. Their printer was broken. What is the point of all these chains if you can't even get what you want easily?!

We drove back down the ugly mall and found an Office Depot. Their printer was working. Success! But when we printed everything, we realized my images were too low-res and looked pixilated and crappy. Well, fine. In a moment of desperation, I decided I was going to send them all anyway, but Brian calmed me down and convinced me to get higher-res versions and that we'd print them the following day. Both of us were tense and frustrated, so we took a few deep breaths, got back in the car, and drove to Pensacola. We listened to a couple of episodes of *This American Life* and *unwound*. We arrived in Pensacola after dark, and decided to get a good night's sleep, so we parked to play Scrabble and the Times crossword.

Unfortunately, before we started, I googled "Impending Water Crisis" and came up with all these facts about the fact that we are headed for a global water shortage and famine. That was upsetting, and I started to feel incredibly small and helpless. Brian and I learned as much as we could from the websites, and decided we both needed to start taking more responsibility for where our food was coming from. We decided we would continue to plan and prepare, hopefully without becoming survivalist nutballs, but that at the moment, all we could do was go to sleep.

So we played the crossword. We did some Scrabble. We went to sleep. It was one of those days.

January 6, 2011 – The Day of the Sunshine State

We woke up in Pensacola, in a hotel parking lot near the Gulf Coast.

Brian, being a better, healthier person than I, went for a run. To be fair to me, I was feeling pretty stressed out about my application and I really wanted to get my essay right so that I could submit it. I called my mother, she gave me some editing advice, I got annoyed and then took it because it was good advice (as always), and rewrote my essay. Then I rewrote it again, and finally felt good about it. So when Brian returned from his thirty minute run (thirty minutes! goddammit), I submitted my stuff online in Brian's presence so I could be sure that I got everything right. Then we went off to try printing again.

We found an Office Depot across a giant bridge on a little island called Gulf

Breeze. The bridge was so long, in fact, that it had a sign asking all of us to check our fuel before we crossed. Next to the bridge was another, decrepit bridge that was either in progress or defunct, which gulls perched on to rest. We got to the other side and realized that Pensacola (and its affiliate islands) must be tourist a tourist destination, everything was sort of bright and pastel and encouraging to “Go to the beach!” or “Turn left here! Only \$5!” We avoided the advertisements and went to the well shaded parking lot of the Office Depot.

This time, there were no mistakes. The photos were excellent (Thank you Hashimoto for sending them my way!) and I was able to compile everything together in a folder successfully – that is, after much hemming and hawing and double checking and triple checking and making sure that Brian saw me put it in the folder, it’s in the folder, right? did you see it, are you sure?

We drove back to Pensacola because I didn’t trust the post office on a little sleepy Florida island, and had the absolute nicest postal official help us. His son was in graduate school for accounting, and he wished me luck, which I appreciated. I left feeling light. Success! One more to go!

We left the car and walked through the historic but not amazing downtown to the highway and underneath until we came to a vegan coffee shop. Vegan food? In Florida? Who knew. We got a grilled cheese, and I remembered how much I hate soy cheese, but the coffee with soy milk was excellent. Then we headed back to the car, bid a fond farewell to Pensacola, and made our way to Tallahassee.

I really wanted to take the coast, but our funds for the day would not permit it – it was the difference between one gas tank and two, so we opted for the freeway. I really hate taking the freeway – it feels like cheating. Luckily it was the 10 (our home interstate!) and it was actually prettier than expected, surrounded by trees on all sides, the crap kept to a minimum.

We arrived in Tallahassee and discovered a sort of vibrant place. I mean, it’s the capital, but I guess I had always sort of pictured it as a backwater, some little nowhere place with a bunch of fast food joints and not much else. I mean, there were those, but there was also a downtown. Brian and I paused to watch a few minutes of a JV boys soccer game (Go Leon Lions!), then headed into town to a coffee shop near campus.

Surprise of surprises – it was vegan! What is this about, Florida? When did you get alternative?

We had some coffee (this place did provide regular half and half) and worked for awhile. Actually, Brian worked. I wikipedia’d old movie stars. Did you know that Gene Kelly was a liberal who fought against the Committee for Un-American Activities? Hooray! Fred Astaire and Clark Gable, on the other hand, were Republican (although that was different back then, but still). Joan Crawford may

or may not have been crazy, as well as Betty Davis, and Katharine Hepburn remains awesome. So much for work.

I decided that the time had come to watch *Gone with the Wind*, considering the fact that a) I haven't seen it in forever, b) Brian's never seen it, and c) we will shortly be heading into Georgia. So we made some soup in the parking lot (Amy's organic is our new canned soup of choice) and then found a hotel parking lot where we settled in and watched the first half of that epic movie.

Epic? Yes. Racist and totally problematic? Definitely. I had forgotten how incredibly offensive that movie is. I mean I remembered, but just not with clarity. Woah. I felt almost ashamed watching it. We got to the intermission and turned it off, agreeing to watch the rest tomorrow, but still – what a really disturbing film. And not because it means to be disturbing. Which is what makes it disturbing.

After that, I couldn't sleep, so I played the crossword alone while Brian, the wonder-sleeper, fell asleep within five minutes of deciding to close his eyes. Eventually I drifted off too, but not without the usual envy of wishing I could just put my head down and pass into sweet dreams.

January 7 – 10, 2011 – The Days of Florida

I know, it's not fair.

You've been waiting, hoping, checking your safari favorites every day and night, wistful for my thoughts on Tallahassee and the citrus south.

Well, I'm here to tell you, it's been a rough few days. And frankly, not interesting enough for me to go back through and recount each detail, which would read something like "First I did this, then I did this, and then we went and had some coffee for a few hours, and then we watched a movie/played scrabble and fell asleep."

That's the boring part. It actually has been no more boring than any other days, but boring enough for me not to waste your time trying to remember every detail six days later. The rough part is why I haven't been writing, why it's taken me so long to get my writing act together.

There are a number of things, but the main one is that Brian and I have decided that this trip is pretty much over.

Let me clarify – it's not actually over. We have a few more stops to make. But we're going to be speeding up. We're going to be speeding up because we've

spent the last few days sniping at each other and upon a lengthy discussion, came to the conclusion that the “living in a truck” portion of our relationship needs to cease. Not that it hasn’t been great. It has. It’s been wonderful – one of the most exciting, liberating and life-altering experiences either of us has ever had, and it has brought us closer than anything else could have. But we’ve been at this for almost 100 days, and I think that is more than enough time to spend every waking moment with your significant other in about two feet of space. So let’s say this now: the trip is not over, but we’re winding down. And we are both relieved to be heading back to a normal living situation soon.

All that said, there have been highlights! It has not all been serious conversations and impending conclusions.

We came to the Atlantic Ocean! After leaving Tallahassee on Saturday, we drove through Jacksonville, ending our favorite interstate rather abruptly and unceremoniously as it merged into an entirely new highway without so much as a “This is the end of the great ribbon of highway 10, the connection between the shining seas!” or something similarly celebratory. Well, fine. So we continued on the unaffiliated state route 10, which was shockingly unattractive, until we made it to Atlantic Beach and saw the coast. My home ocean! How I’d missed it. We walked out onto the beach and stood in the frigid waves, acknowledging that the Atlantic in January is the same temperature if not slightly warmer than the Pacific in October. Just saying. Atlantic’s better.

We went for a thirty minute run on the beach! That’s right, I joined Brian in his healthy enterprise, and was mighty glad I did, not just because I felt so good afterwards, but because it was beautiful – the tide was out, the sand was flat and hard, and people were wandering all up and down the windy shore, with dogs (including one that almost chased me), and kids and bikes. It was great. It was a great run.

Speaking of health, I have come to a conclusion – and I came to it during this span of four days, so it counts as a bullet point. I have decided that it is time to become more conscious of what I eat. It started in earnest in New Orleans, when I spent time with my vegetarian/vegan friends, and considered the political and environmental implications behind their every day food choices. It started when I talked to Rachel about why she became vegan and she pointed me in the direction of the books she had read which had turned her off to the meat industry. It started when, in Tallahassee, I found out that my friend from home had recently become gluten-free and vegetarian and was on her way to becoming a vegan because of how she felt and the energy she now has. But in truth, it started long before the past few weeks. It started in Alaska, in Anchorage, when I looked around that far away town and felt like I could be anywhere – I could be in any awful sprawl, surrounded by cheap fast food joints and crappy chain restaurants, huge supermarkets with too many choices and not enough ethics – I

could be in any part of these United States. And after that, as we've driven all over the country and discovered in mile after mile, in any developed area, the same food places over and over and over again. And it occurred to me that this kind of obscene abundance cannot come without a price – that we are paying for it, and we will continue to pay for it, with our environment and our health. And more than that, with our souls – we have covered this beautiful and diverse land with the same twenty stores every where you go, the same twenty restaurants, the same neon signs, so that no matter where you go, you never feel like you've gotten anywhere. And I don't begin to pretend that my boycotting of chain stores will make any sort of difference in a large scale, but it will make a difference to me – that if I can spend my dollars wisely and eat my food knowing where it comes from and who is getting paid and that my money will not be used to pollute the ground or the air or the water, or feed a corporation or destroy another small business, or contribute to intolerable work environments, then at least I will not be contributing to a much larger problem. That said, I'm probably not going to go vegan. I don't think I could give up cheese or a really good burger. But I am going to become a more conscious consumer, be more careful about where my meat and cheese and wine and fruit come from, and I have this trip to thank for that.

Speaking of local businesses, we found a cute coffee shop in Atlantic Beach called Lillie's where we spent a majority of our time. We did the Sunday crossword there, and were spotted out by an older couple who told us we were doing a good job but that PIE, and not our previously written YAM, was the answer to one-across. They were crossworders too, and had already finished the Sunday, which they generously gave us as a cheat sheet (proud to say, we did not need it). They also called me out for being a Yankee in a conversation that went something like this:

The man: "We always try to buy it for the crossword, but its gotten so expensive. \$5!"

Me: "It's \$6 in some places"

The man: "Right! I mean, it's a paper!"

Me: "Yeah, but it's not just any paper."

The man: "It's still just a paper."

Me: "But it's the Times."

The man: "..."

The woman: "You must be a Yankee."

And, appropriate to the Yankee that I indeed am, we watched the Jets game! On

Saturday night, at a bar called the Sun Dog across from the square leading to the ocean, we got a couple of beers and some fried chicken and watched the Jets play a really awesome and exciting game. They won in the last few seconds! You know how I know? Because Brian has taught me all about football and now I understand how it works! This makes it significantly more fun to watch, believe you me. I also discovered that Mark Sanchez, the Jets QB, is an avid musical theater fan – according to his wikipedia page, which I perused during the duller moments of the game, since moving to New York he’s become entranced by the power of live theater. Yes! Me too, Mark! He apparently even presented at the Tony’s, and while that particular celebration of Broadway masturbation is not my favorite thing in the world, I am touched and gladdened to know that a powerful sports figure is man enough to admit that he likes to watch people sing and dance on stage. It made me so happy, I tipsily penned a note to him in my head thanking him for his support, and I intend to actually write it out and send it to him the next time I’m buzzed enough to think that its a good and useful idea. While we sat and watched the game at the bar, the dance floor had crowded up and a cover band began to play. Three guys and a microphone singing all the greats: Johnny Cash, Prince, Elvis. And what was cool about this was the singer, this guy who couldn’t have been older than thirty, singing to a room of mostly drunk middle-aged individuals, could change his voice to fit each singer perfectly. I mean, really. It was amazing.

We also watched the Auburn/Oregon game on Monday night in a slightly less rowdy bar/restaurant, which was thrilling because 1) Brian is always for the Pac Ten and yet, 2) Brian’s cousin Clark goes to Auburn. Brian’s family – cousins, sister, father, uncle, aunts, mother, even baby nephews – were all in Arizona tailgating outside the game and watching it on TV from the parking lot, so our mutual gaze made us feel just a little bit closer to home.

Of course, we read the news about Giffords and her constituents getting shot, and have been following the story avidly. I’m not going to say much here, because this is not a political blog, but it did seriously affect my days (part of the “rough”).

So that’s it for the sunshine state. Oh wait! We saw an orange tree! OK, that’s really it, at least for the highlights.

Now back to your regularly scheduled updates.

January 11, 2011 – The Day of Georgia Rest

We drove out of Florida this morning, but not before one last stop at Lillie’s for some extremely decent coffee.

It's been raining and cold. For the past few days we've been parking the car in a dead end street right next to the sand and the ocean, and every night as I'm trying desperately to fall asleep, I've listened to the wind howling and shaking the car, and the waves crashing. It's actually soothing – the car becomes like a cradle, except its a cradle that could at any moment be destroyed by a falling tree. Brian assured me that wouldn't happen. And he was right – it didn't. But I'm sure my worrying was useful anyway.

So we drove north into an unseasonably cold Georgia. In an attempt to avoid major highways, we tried to drive on the 1 and ended up getting lost, and then driving through a gated community just to get back on track, which was sort of thrilling – we felt almost illicit. We only got in because someone was exiting just as we drove up. Ha ha! We scooted in ahead of an older bewildered gentleman in his car and drove around the disappointingly banal little neighborhood. I was expecting jewels! Pristine lawns! Mansions! Instead we got pinkish apartment building and little golf carts. It was weird, but not nearly exciting enough to warrant a fence in what already seemed like a pretty upper class area of the world.

Anyway, after our little illegal excursion, we ended up by accident at the Navy base. Finally, we turned ourselves around and got on the right road. We revisited our long lost friend Ira Glass, continuing our journey through the complete works of This American Life – we've gotten about a year into the program. This is clearly going to take longer than we thought...

Eventually, we made it to Savannah. It's sort of strange coming into it from the south, because its hard to tell if there's anything there. Your sources tell you that you're within striking distance of the city limits, and yet it seems so empty – rural almost. Where's the sprawl? Where's the endless suburban lead up to the deserted downtown?

Savannah has none of that, or at least not very much. All of a sudden, you find yourself in a run down city. And then soon after that, you find yourself in a very beautiful city, lined with trees and historic buildings. We were starving, so we yelped a sandwich joint near one of the illustrious squares, parked and wandered over. The shop was just that – a small area to stand in, a counter, and guys making sandwiches behind it. The sandwiches were filled – brimming, I'd say – with meat. Chicken, sausage, mayo sauce, marinara sauce, parmesan cheese. And with every order, the two guys in charge of the sandwich makings would shout "Shit yeah!" as in "Do you want homemade or smoked sausage" "Oh, homemade please" "Shit yeah!" or "Do you want marinara sauce?" "Yes" "Shit yeah!" It didn't seem to matter what anybody wanted, although they did tend to look disappointed if you didn't want every single sauce they had. Luckily I did, so there was no sad faces and plaintive "Really? Are you sure?"'s. The sandwiches were excellent, by the way. We ate them in our car before going to our hotel.

That's right. A hotel. And you know what? I don't even feel bad or apologetic. I'm going to tell you right now in fact that we booked that hotel for two nights, and are planning to stay in a hotel in Charleston, too. Usually at this point I would be wringing my hands and wondering if getting a hotel is a betrayal of everything I set out on this trip to do, but not today. Today I say, no it is not a betrayal, it is necessary at this point in the journey. I have been dutifully living out of this truck, sleeping on people's couches, wwoofing, everything I had planned, for 95 days. And now it's time to take a little space from the back of the truck, to sleep in a couple of real beds, especially in 20 degree weather. My mother told me to be flexible – this is me being flexible. We got a hotel and it was a wonderful idea.

We got a room at the Country Inn and Suites, a hotel whose many parking lots across the nation we have frequented over the past three months. And let me tell you, this is by far the nicest Country Inn and Suites we've stayed in yet. I think it's because this particular franchise is housed in an old historic building in the downtown of Savannah, but none the less they have done a stellar job keeping the place feeling as fancy as it looks from the outside. And on the cheap! Don't get me wrong – I hate chain hotels. But we're on a budget and its the best we could do on short notice.

Our room was lovely, and our bed was a king size bed! Why anyone actually needs a king size bed is beyond me, but I was excited just the same. We got inside, unpacked a bit, and Brian immediately decided it was time to build a fort. I said "awesome" and we set to putting up the sheet, draping it over chairs and tying it to the lamp. Then we spread our comforter out underneath and played Scrabble for a bit. I lost. I mean, I almost always lose. But our fort made the blow easier to take.

We headed out to the store for some provisions, and upon returning, we headed down to the small gym on the second floor. It reminded me of the last hotel gym we took advantage of – the little gym in that hotel in Fairbanks, looking out onto the snow. This gym had no large window but a very impressive mirror, I guess so you could watch yourself get fitter before your eyes. We did twenty minutes since it was getting late, and then returned to our room.

We ate cheese and bread and chocolate and wine in our fort while watching *It Happened One Night* (Brian is a newly converted Clark Gable fan). It was a wonderful way to spend our first evening in Savannah. Then we fell asleep. On the bed, with the fort at a ready by our side.

January 12, 2011 – The Day of the City Beautiful

Woah, Savannah is gorgeous.

But first, a note that Brian brought me breakfast in bed from the free buffet downstairs. He is a ninja – I didn't hear him get up or leave at all, and next thing I knew, something smelled like high fructose corn syrup and I open my eyes to find french toast and sausage. So I'll say it again: Brian is a ninja, and he is awesome.

After we ate, we lazed around for a bit and then finally got up our nerve to brave the cold and wander the city for a few hours. We put on our coats and our last remaining clean clothes, and headed out.

We wandered in the early afternoon, bright and clear and surprisingly chilly. We headed towards the big colonial cemetery, and on the way got a sense of why the city planning is so highly lauded. The squares, dotting the city in symmetry, are amazing – little park oases, covered by huge looming oaks coated in hanging Spanish moss. The houses surrounding these little verdant spots are huge and ornate, or stately and inviting, all extremely southern – exactly how you might picture Savannah in the late 19th century. It all feels like at any moment some woman in a huge hooped skirt could come strolling down the narrow sidewalk, a parasol in her gloved hand. Of course, nothing of the sort happened, but it increased my appreciation for Southern cities – between Savannah and New Orleans, the incredible commitment to preservation is extremely commendable and appreciated.

We got to the cemetery which, because it hasn't held a fresh corpse in over a hundred years, is more a museum than a place of mourning. The graves hold some of the famous southern men of the 18th and 19th century – doctors, patriots, and even British soldiers. The graveyard itself is beautiful – somehow palm and deciduous trees can live in attractive harmony. It's the kind of graveyard one might hope to be buried in if one was the kind of person who believed that the place of burial were important. I'm not, so my jealousy of the dead only lasted a moment. Then I continued to read the well placed plaques, learned some new information, and then joined Brian as we strolled out the gate and towards the river.

After the cemetery, I started to notice that in the center of many of the squares were mausoleums; giant statues erected over the supposed remains of this general or that one, including Oglethorpe – the founder of Savannah – and his Indian counterpart Tomochichi. There are plaques everywhere, as there are in many tourist oriented cities, and while informative, I was sort of taken aback to read on Tomochichi's that there was a girl who helped with the transactions between the British and the Native Americans who was referred to as a "half-breed." I read that and said "Oh my" out loud, and then glanced at the date, which said Erected 1952. Well, Savannah, your plaques are great and all, but

perhaps its time for an update, right?

We walked to the river, and then up and down some extremely steep and potentially dangerous steps, which had “authentic” written all over them. Then we headed back towards a coffee shop and food. The place we had intended to visit was closed, but we ended up at Gallery Espresso, a really neat little cafe and, you guessed it, gallery right next to one of the squares. There were no tables inside, so we shivered at an outside table with our coffee and soup and salad until something opened up inside. We had another cup and hung out for awhile, digging the vibe, if I may say so without sounding ridiculous. Then we headed down to Forsyth, the biggest of the small green areas. We wandered through this legitimate if petite park, along the sunny grass while kids played, and eventually ended up at the store we had gone to the night before. We bought more of the same dinner we tend to have, and then meandered back across the park. We paused to swing a bit, and then walked back to the hotel as dusk was starting to fall.

We got back to the room, and then decided to go swimming. The hotel has a pool and everything! We headed downstairs, a little nervously, in our respective bathing suits, and jumped in. Oh, in that indoor pool it was not quite cold, but definitely not the warm temperature we had been hoping for. After a few races, all of which I lost, we headed back upstairs for a shower and then settled in to watch the next movie on our personal queue. It was Brian’s turn. He chose *The Departed*. Slightly different from my cheery oldies, but I loved it. I was expecting to hate it, but I really thought it was great. It helped that Brian had already seen it so I could turn away from the screen and ask things like “Is he going to shoot him now? Is he going to shoot him?” And Brian could reassure me or agree that I should keep my eyes averted.

After that, we watched the first half of *Funny Girl*, which actually in comparison with *The Departed* is a serious light weight, but enjoyable none the less. The fort by this time was down and we had reinstalled ourselves on the bed like adults with no trace of our house made out of blankets, and so we fell asleep effortlessly after turning the movie off.

January 13, 2011 – The Day of East Coast Gazing

After enduring Fox News with our breakfast (not in bed but in the dining room this time) we packed up and headed out. We grabbed our car and headed down past the park to a little coffee shop I’d heard about from the New York Times 36 hours in Savannah. We parked, got out, and walked up for our daily jolt.

I am sorry to say that this coffee shop could easily be in my running top five coffee shops in the USA. It was cute and cozy, art on the walls and couches on the floor and free wifi and excellent coffee with compostable to go tops! The light was low-ish, the windows were high and faced the park. Damn damn damn. I cursed myself for seeing it, for getting their delicious coffee not in a ceramic mug but a paper cup, for not taking off my coat and opening my computer and staying awhile but instead rushing out to the next great city. I think I would have rather not even glanced in, not known that I'd missed an opportunity to add to my list. I comforted myself with my steaming cup, walking back to the car in the still surprising cold, and as we drove away, lamenting my lost cafe love. Oh well.

We drove north to Charleston. Frankly, after Savannah, I wasn't expecting much. I was shocked by Savannah, and I had heard that Charleston was even better, but I couldn't let myself believe it because I was sure I would just be disappointed. What could be better, more charmingly southern, than Savannah's squares and dripping trees, than its old houses with wrought iron gates?

Charleston, that's what. Actually, as we drove in, I braced myself. Charleston has much more sprawl than Savannah, so we drove through at least twenty minutes of dull suburbs before we came to the city itself, and by that point I had resigned myself to Charleston being just another American city.

We drove into the middle of the city, near one of the colleges, and paused to do our incredibly hefty load of laundry. The neighborhood was a little broken down but not too bad, and the laundromat featured three adorable children with their chore ridden parents, running back and forth, playing in the baskets, with the youngest the most aggressive and cheerful. She rebuffed her brother's admonishments with a pout and then a laugh, and I was totally in love. Her sister spent her time calling "Hello?" and "Is anyone in there?" into the empty machines and then turning around to see if I was paying attention, which of course I always was.

After our laundry, we drove to the more touristy part of town a few blocks away and parked in an attempt to find some southern cuisine. The town was still not impressing me as much as Savannah, but it did seem to be busier, with more tourists and more general activity. The main street of King was lined with those same old stores you'd find in any upscale tourist neighborhood – A&F, Quicksilver, Apple, etc. We strolled to our destination, a highly rated bbq place, but it was under construction, so we opted for a place called Justine's a block over. On our way, we passed a fancy version of Best Western. When I say that, I don't mean it was a dressed up for a Best Western, I mean it was a formerly nice hotel that is now a Best Western (not unlike the Comfort Inn and Suites we stayed at in Savannah). You know, I hate chains (could you guess?), but there's something about chains preserving some of the dignity of the buildings they take over that makes me feel a little better. Plus, Best Western is precisely in our price

range, so if we have to stay there, I'm glad at least we can pretend we're somewhere more unique.

Anyway, we came to Justine's and had what I would say was very mediocre food. I mean, it was good, but it was not really really good. It was fine. But I will say that the dessert, a coca-cola cake, and yes there is such a thing, was a beautiful gooey sweet thing that I will always cherish in my sense memory. After our late lunch, we went back to the Best Western and booked a room, parked the car in the lot, parked our stuff in our comparatively attractive room, and then headed out into the cold for a stroll.

Let me reiterate – I was not, at this point, impressed by Charleston. I love a good park, and there were parks everywhere in Savannah. Here, no parks. How could they possibly compare? We left our hotel and wandered down Meeting Street (which is, in my opinion, an extremely quaint name for a street), and then took a turn towards the water. At first, we encountered a sort of industrial lot – fail again, Charleston. But then, the lot gave way to a beautiful and well kept walkway, lined with palm trees and oak trees and draped with that famous spanish moss. The sun was setting around the bend, so the sky was dusky and pretty and the lamps had just been lit. We paused to read some very informative histories of Charleston and saw the city expand on each panel, and started to understand where we stood in relation to the rest of the town's space and time and felt very connected. We walked on the path, past grand old houses, beautiful balconies and large impressive windows, lit from within so that we could see the lives inside. We walked and came to the tip of the peninsula, and there for my eager landscaped eyes, a park! With canons poised to fight off Sherman! Gee whiz how cool. And there beyond, across the bay and behind the hills of swirling islands, the sun had just set and the sky and water reflecting it were tinted bright neon orange. It was beautiful, and there was energy all around, even though this part of the city was quiet save for a few nighttime runners. A siren past over a bridge and I realized that this was a real city that had managed to retain much of its former grandeur. I don't know how much was actually going on there, but there were people here and they were busy and that was nice. We circled the park and headed back up King, which suddenly seemed not touristy but stately. We peered in windows until we came to stores. Brian made his way into the Apple store to play with an iPad and I stayed on the sidewalk and watched the people. Then we walked back to our hotel.

We came back and promptly realized we were hungry. This was too bad, really, considering we were in any other city than New York. Brian wanted pizza, I wanted no such thing. Pizza was the only thing that was open, and that pizza was Dominoes. After much protesting and bitching on my end, the pizza arrived, and we ate our food, did a crossword, and fell asleep.

January 14, 2011 – The Day of Getting Lucky

Relax. I'm not going to tell you about sex. Besides, I don't think it counts as getting lucky when you're in a long term relationship.

I am going to say a quick note about my morning shower, but nothing racy, don't worry. There's nothing I love more than nice hotel soap in an attractive hotel shower. This soap was the fanciest of the not so fancy soap we've had – it had oatmeal in it! I know. Fancy. Plus the shower felt like a cave, and that is always a sort of fun, fantastical start to any day.

After our showering experience, we headed out. We'd gotten up late, but were craving breakfast, and that didn't seem like such a far fetched desire, Charleston being a city filled with restaurants and this being a Friday around 11. We found one place that opened at 11:30 and headed over there, only to discover it opened at 11:30 for lunch. What about breakfast?! Well, never mind, there are other fish in the sea. We walked around the corner and found another place, opening at 11:30. We were reading some great reviews of the breakfast items, so we figured this place, surely, serves breakfast even at that late hour. As we waited, we checked yelp for other options just in case, and couldn't find a single place that could guarantee us breakfast, or at least a decent well rated breakfast, anywhere in the late morning on a weekday. It seems that Charlestonians are very finicky about when you can eat what meal, a quiriness that I simply cannot get behind – I like breakfast always! Our place eventually opened and to our dismay we discovered immediately that they only served lunch.

Well, fuck.

Undeterred, we left, determined. I looked on yelp, found one last option, and headed in that direction. When we got there, we found the kind of hole in the wall that could make you nervous – in a city of beautiful buildings, this place was a one story, side of the highway type building, with a couple of other stores next to it. Hungry and serious about finding breakfast food, we took a breath and headed in.

Boy, are we lucky that those other places were not into late morning breakfast because this place was amazing. I mean, maybe the best no frills breakfast I've ever had. Brian had breakfast potatoes, covered with grits and (the key) sausage gravy with bacon on top, while I had stuffed brioche French toast with peaches. Holy hell, I am officially happy for all time. Alongside some really good solid orange juice, this was the perfect food, served on styrofoam (I mean, why use something sustainable when you can use the least sustainable substance ever created?) and blue checked table clothes. Yes yes yes.

We left smelling like grease and walked back up towards the hotel where we'd

left our car. We got in with the intention of heading across the river to a hill where we could see the whole city, but when we got to the other side of the bridge, decided we weren't that into it and decided to start our long trip to Atlanta. We fueled up and got on the road.

I don't love taking interstates, but sometimes they're necessary, and occasionally quite lovely. This was one of those times. Actually, southern interstates on the whole have been at least moderately attractive, like how I picture the (now) interstate heading up to our farmhouse. Anyway, we took this interstate the six or so hours to Atlanta, listening to *This American Life*, which was sorely neglected all through New Mexico and Texas and Louisiana and even into Florida. We're back, Ira!

We pulled into the gargantuan city of Atlanta as dark was falling, around 7pm. Brian's cousins live in the outskirts of the city, and we were slated to stay with Kyle, who I've met once under busy, crowded circumstances in the aftermath of a show I directed at a bar on the Bowery in New York on Brian's and my one year anniversary, so while we've chatted briefly, I haven't had a chance to get to know him. I find Atlanta a little daunting – it seems like the epitome of one of those sprawling unmanageable cities that don't make sense to me. I was both scared and excited at the prospect of trying to figure it out a little bit. Kyle lives in a little community of apartments in what to me doesn't seem like a city at all but is, apparently, still within the limits. We pulled in and discovered that he was not yet home, so we wandered around the complex until we saw his car pull up.

We spent the evening catching up. Kyle works in sales for the Atlanta ballet and I, being nervous and eager to impress, spent an hour talking his ear off about dance styles and opinions on performance (of which I have many) and he very patiently talked with me about his work, which I'm sure was the last thing he wanted to discuss on a Friday evening. Then his sister Kelsey showed up from her home in the outer town/suburbs which mesh seamlessly with the city proper. I know Kelsey a little better because she was at the Andrich bonanza in the Puget sound for the Fourth of July that first summer I spent with Brian and we hung out there. Kelsey and Kyle are great – they have a clear and appreciable bond, an ease and a kindness towards one another that comes of close siblings with age, and they're fun to hang around. They both are very southern in their manners, which I find lovely and fascinating, since I am decidedly New York in my own and wish sometimes I could tone it down a bit. Point being, they're great, and like Brian's cousins back in LA, I immediately felt like they accepted me as part of the family – a trait of the Andrich family that I value enormously.

We went to the store to pick up some food, then baked a Digiorno pizza with some vegetable add-ons, drank a couple of beers, and chatted until around 11. Then Kelsey headed home, Kyle blew up an air mattress for us, and we fell asleep after what turned out to be a surprisingly long day.

January 15, 2011 – The Day of Fathoming Atlanta

We awoke to the sunshine through the large venetian blinded windows. We got up, got dressed and awaited Kyle, who was up shortly thereafter. We hung out for a bit, ate some cereal (with milk!) and then headed out to get a hold on that huge city.

I guess Atlanta is not any bigger than LA, but for some reason it makes significantly less sense to me. I guess because there's no ocean, no natural border to tell me where it stops and starts. And I guess it's not bigger than New York, at least not in population or in terms of things to do, but still Atlanta has always felt unmanageable to me, and I couldn't shake that feeling as we drove around. I couldn't help but notice the fact that there really doesn't seem to be a way to get from A to B without a car – there were no people on the streets, often no sidewalks even, and that's difficult for me to comprehend. I know, it sounds like I'm exaggerating, but really – I don't understand how to live in a place where you couldn't really walk to work even if you wanted to.

Speaking of work, that was our first stop. We were heading to the ballet, a nod to my artistic interests, and I was grateful because art buildings I get, and I hoped it would help me orient myself. My hopes were dropping as we drove through a sort of industrial neighborhood, and I just kept imagining Lincoln Center, with its giant sidewalks and subway stations, the merging of multiple art forms in one site, a temple to New York's artistic dedication. But when we arrived, I relaxed and was able to focus. The Atlanta ballet is housed in an old industrial building that has been remarkably and excellently converted into a beautiful dance center. Giant windows grace the lobby, high ceilings over the waiting students and auditioning dancers. The administrative offices are tasteful and open, an art administrator's dream. The studios are handsome, again with floor to ceiling windows for plenty of natural light. It's a great space – really great – and I felt more at home, jealous even that I couldn't come to work there every day myself.

And then something miraculous happened. When we left, I suddenly saw the skyline, and was able to sort of position myself in context of Atlanta. I had relaxed a bit, and consequently was able to get oriented. After that, I saw Atlanta not as the anti-New York, but just a city like any other city we'd visited so far. We drove into the downtown, past old and new buildings, and appreciated the almost cavalier way the city positions old town houses next to towering sky scrapers of glass. We drove past Olympic Park, and then back around to another part of town for some coffee (yelped, of course). We ended up at a place called Octane, a place with an excellent latte and French press, but far too slick for my

seating tastes – I'm talking modern art chairs. I love modern art, but I like my furniture to be recognizable as such. We sat and talked for an hour or so before heading back to the apartment, where we were met by Kelsey.

We decided on burgers for dinner, and went to a neighborhood called Little Five Points, which seemed like the hipster capital. Eclectic stores, people walking on the sidewalks, restaurants – it felt a little more urban. We parked and headed to the Vortex, a burger/bar place with tons of weird stuff all over the walls, which aggressively declared its right to allow smoking (fuck you government! and all lungs of all citizens! U! S! A!). Good burgers, beer, and a chance to watch the Falcons/Packers game.

We hung out for awhile, then headed home to continue watching the game and to play my favorite of the many card games taught to me by Brian's extended family: Liverpool rummy (although it was originally introduced to me as Croatian rummy. Brian won't call it that and gives me a look when I do, but I sort of like it). We played, I lost handsomely, I contained my hatred of losing, and then we all said good night, and Brian and I retreated to our air mattress.

January 16, 2011 – The Day of More Andrich Family

We promised to make brunch for Kyle and Kelsey to express our thanks, so we set out in the morning for the makings of our breakfast tacos Juan in a Million style. We picked up our ingredients, came back, Kelsey arrived with coffee and we set to making our food, while Kyle, Kelsey and Kyle's roommate Travis watched an ESPN exclusive on racism in sports broadcasting. We made our giant tacos (12 eggs, thank you very much), and sat down for one last game of rummy. This time I came in third, but Brian came in last so I was satisfied (a disclaimer: I'm not a hateful girlfriend – Brian is just really good at lots of games, so its very satisfying when I beat him. And I'm competitive. So is my mother. It's not my fault).

Somehow, when we were all done, it was close to 5pm. I don't know how that happened, but that meant it was time for a quick shower before we left. We hopped in, hopped out, using Kyle's proffered guest towels, said our goodbyes, and headed out. We were in for a three hour drive, which passed uneventfully. We arrived in the suburbs of Birmingham around 7pm central time, to hang out with Brian's uncle and aunt.

I really love the Andrichs. I'm just saying that right now – Brian's family is full of noisy, funny, hard partying individuals, and they are, all of them, incredibly

warm and kind. I had only met Gary and Tori once before, again at the same island in the Puget Sound where I'd met everyone else for the first time, during that incredibly boisterous, beer filled week where random people wandered on and off the property and we slept in the car across the street among the numerous rvs and parked vehicles carrying Andrich kin in and out for the Fourth. Gary had won me over when he had made fun of my going to Vassar while seated in an incredibly low lawn chair, and Tori with her dry humor and dead pan manner, and their apparent affection for each other. It's no accident that their three kids – Kyle, Kelsey, and the youngest of all the cousins, Clark – have stayed so close into their adulthoods, in the same way that its no accident that any of the other cousins – the three girls or Brian and his sisters – have stayed close as siblings and between families. Needless to say, I was excited to spend time with them again.

We arrived in time for dinner, but we sat for a bit chatting before we went to the table. Their home is cozy and inviting, and there was a fire going, which is always a plus in my book. We ate dinner – chicken tortilla soup – and then stayed in the kitchen until late in the evening. We planned for the following day, MLK Jr. Day: Gary had to go to work but he would meet us for dinner after we three had gone to the Civil Rights Institute in town. Then it was time for sleep. Brian and I stayed up a bit longer to do the Sunday, but fell asleep almost immediately, in Kelsey's old room.

January 17, 2011 – The Day of Civil Rights

We awoke later than we had planned, and went into the living room where we found Tori relaxing on her day off. She informed us that she had to meet up with a guy to find out about fixing the windows and that we should go to the Civil Rights Institute without her. So we hung out the rest of the morning with her, drinking coffee and eating cereal and chatting. Then, slowly, like it was our day off too, we showered, changed, and went into Birmingham.

The city, which really is a small city, is surrounded on all sides by suburbs. That, by now, is not surprising. What was, however, and highly disconcerting, was how empty the city was. I know – most people in America don't live in the same urban environment where they work, and today was a holiday, so of course the downtown might be a little vacant. But it wasn't just the lack of people. The whole place felt deserted. Old buildings sat abandoned, every third had a for sale sign, and many windows were broken or missing all together. It was so strange. A few people lingered on corners, fewer still seemed to have somewhere to go, but on the whole, it felt like a dead place. A dead place with sort of pretty old buildings, but abandoned none the less.

We parked and walked in the direction of the Civil Rights Institute, but when we came to a vacant lot and an empty walk up 16th street, we decided to hedge our bets and head in a different direction. We walked back past the huge tall building with the unlit sign out front and the broken windows and the musty damp smell of condemned hallways wafting up from the sewer below. We figured we must have gotten it wrong, and wandered back over to the main drag, which was slightly less deserted, walking in the direction of a museum we thought might be it.

It wasn't. We did wander around one of those great Southern parks, but it too felt lonely. A few men sat on benches, hanging out the holiday, but the strange building we thought was the Institute was empty and dark, and the museum was a fine arts museum that also seemed to be shut. We looked at a posted map of the area and found our destination: it was indeed on sixteenth street, but further up than where we had been before. By this time we had walked quite a bit, and were getting pretty hungry, so we turned down nineteenth street with the intention of grabbing the car and finding some food, but on the way we found what looked like a little deli in a modern building.

It was not a deli. It was a sort of fancy, chic little sandwich place called Mix – the kind of place where they bake their own bread and have chefs in white outfits who bring your food to you from the back. The seating was sleek and modern and there was a movie playing against one of the high white walls. It was so strange, so totally out of place, and the food was good, too. How weird. Brian and I marveled at this little anomaly in the middle of desolate Birmingham, ate our food, and then bought the best brownie I've ever had ever before walking out and back on our Civil Right Institute quest. As we left, Brian commented that it was a pity that place was going to go out of business, and I agreed.

We walked, savoring our amazing brownie, towards sixteenth street, and there we found all the people. A line snaked around the corner from the Institute, across the street from the church where the four little girls were killed. In the square park outside, statues commemorating the fight for civil rights in Birmingham studded the walkways – modern art pieces, evocative and, in my opinion, very well done. There were the two walls on either side of the walk way, out of which sprung snarling dog statues, so that when you walked between them you were caught on all sides by teeth and paws coming out of nowhere. Bars and a statue of MLK himself, as though in an ineffectual prison. Everywhere, kids climbed all over, holding onto the bars, climbing on the dogs, and laughing. A group of teenagers were singing gospel songs outside the museum entrance, clapping, harmonizing, and there were hotdog vendors and Christian t-shirt vendors. I'd never seen anything like it. I didn't know that people actually celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day. It was poignant, the first time I really understood where I was and what I was witnessing – Birmingham had been a battleground. This is no symbolic holiday – this is a chance to pay homage to the

citizens who worked for victory.

We decided not to try for the museum, instead opting to walk the streets which were dotted with informational panels. We read about the drug store which served as a headquarters for the movement in Birmingham and then turned around to look at it, still standing there. We walked along the numbered path and found, further along, the intersection where kids poured into the business district, marching.

And it occurred to me, in a sober moment, that the Civil Rights movement, something which made Birmingham by turns infamous and then illustrious, was perhaps the reason the city was so empty and decimated. Since the 1960s, the population has steadily declined, and the city seems to have slipped pretty far economically. That perhaps wealthy white people left because of the gains made by African Americans, that they gave up the city rather than give up their privilege. The city is, according to Wikipedia, having a renaissance, but it's hard to see. What is apparent, however, is that the city has fallen apart, is almost ghostly, while the surrounding suburbs remain prosperous, with big houses and lawns and intact windows. What is apparent is that victory is not quite so obviously victorious. Birmingham, where civil rights were aggressively campaigned for and bravely achieved, is a striking example of how much farther there still is to go.

We got back in the car and headed back to the suburbs. We came back, greeted by Tori, who informed us that we'd be leaving again in forty-five minutes for a place called Dream Land – a little hole in the wall BBQ joint in Tuscaloosa that would, according to Gary, give us serious credentials with any Alabaman. I went to the bedroom with the very noble desire to work, but ended up napping instead, and then we got in Tori's car and drove to the local Walmart parking lot, where we met up with Gary, transferred to his car, and proceeded on the forty-five minute drive to Tuscaloosa.

Tuscaloosa is not much to write home about, but Dream Land definitely is. It's the kind of place with no windows, a bar and some tables, all food served on styrofoam (that southern favorite), and plenty of napkins. They have ribs, beer and white bread, with beans, cole slaw or potato salad for sides, and that's it. And that's all it needs to be. It's amazing. The best ribs I've probably ever had. The sauce was spicy and sweet and thick, and the meat was tender and fatty. The beans were amazing, the slaw was great, and the beer was cheap and cold. Gary regaled us with stories about Brian's family, which were funny and, on occasion, shocking. Tori likened listening to stories about the Andrich antics to looking in a shop window filled with garish, disorganized things – you just can't look away. As we drove home, Gary asked me about my own family, but I really couldn't top his stories.

We got home and watched the first quarter of Camelot, which happened to be on TCM. You know, I used to love that movie, but I've apparently grown a lot since the last time I saw it because I can recognize it for what it is – a poor excuse for the original Broadway production. Goddamn if they didn't slow those songs down, destroying all momentum and making you just stare in wonder at the screen thinking, "how could anyone think this was a good idea?" Tori and Gary eventually went to bed but we tried to stay up, only making it until the intermission before Brian, bleary eyed and valiant, turned to me and said that he just couldn't do it any more. I didn't blame him. The original soundtrack is much better.

January 18, 2011 – The Day of Memphis Revisited

We awoke to breakfast makings laid out and a note saying goodbye. Tori and Gary had headed off to work, so Brian and I spent an hour or so lazing a bit before getting in the shower and getting back on the road. It's no secret now that both of us are exhausted by this trip and excited to be on our way home in the next month, but sitting in a comfortable home, watching ESPN and drinking coffee really tipped me in the direction of desperation for a home of my own.

But we had to leave, and leave we did, heading in an unexpected direction. We had planned to sort of skirt around Nashville until the weekend, but Gary convinced us to head towards Nashville, a place I had been once and never thought I would see again.

And how, you ask, did he convince us?

Ducks. He told us about the ducks that march into the Peabody Hotel lobby fountain every morning and out again in the late afternoon. Down some stairs, across the floor and up the elevator to their little Duck Palace. Well, I was sold. I mean, we had a few days to kill anyway, and I love ducks. So we took off west again, on our way to that dismal city.

I was, truth be told, prepared to give Memphis another shot. The last time I was there was for the UPTA Auditions – a strange experience all its own – and perhaps I just didn't know enough about American cities at the time to appreciate Memphis. Maybe this time, with some understanding of what I was getting into, I'd be able to fall a little in love with the place. Besides, Elvis' birthplace was on the way, and that would be, you know, exciting.

We stopped in Tupelo (pronounced too-peh-low, not teh-pee-low like I thought), to see the revered home of Elvis' probable conception and definite birth. Well, it

was exactly what you would expect. A tiny, tiny house, propped up on those cement blocks we've become so fond of spotting, moved from its original location and now perched on land owned by an Elvis preservation society of some kind. Actually, it was very well maintained and sort of understated, like they didn't really expect anyone to show up but if someone did, they'd be ready. They'd even moved Elvis' old church to right near by, so you could see the two places he spent his time. Actually, that's not totally accurate – the family moved out of this house after about three years, a fact they fail to mention at the site. But still, it's pretty cool, and they've got all these quotes all around from people who knew Elvis, talking about what a nice, unassuming boy he was, what a good old home southerner, and how he wasn't ever taken seriously as a singer until he made it big. There was a fountain with thirteen spouts representing the thirteen years he spent living in Tupelo before moving to Memphis. The lawn was manicured. I was impressed, and I'm not even a huge Elvis fan.

We drove on, and ended up outside Memphis, driving through the endless run down neighborhoods leading up to the tiny downtown. Finally we arrived and I realized that I would have no Memphis reconciliation.

Memphis is, in my humble opinion, a hole. There is little redeeming about that city, and what is redeeming is ultimately garish and unfortunate. We drove, parked, walked the deserted streets back towards the Peabody and entered that strangely ornate building, wondering who on earth, other than the ducks, was possibly appreciating it.

Well, there were a fair number of people for an off season, I guess, and they were all sitting in the lobby bar or waiting patiently with cameras poised on either side of a mini red carpet which led from the elevator to the fountain where there were, yes indeed, ducks swimming and quacking away. How weird! We waited for the remaining ten minutes until at five o'clock on the dot, a man who clearly hates his job got up and, in the most annoying announcer voice possible, told us a fifteen minute story about the ducks and why they're there and what else we can see in the Peabody and please don't block the ducks from their path to the elevator. Then there was piped in trumpet music and we watched as the ducks walked and quacked their way to the elevator. It was a riot – so weird, so unnecessary, and totally worth the trip. I loved it. And then we headed back out into Memphis.

We got a room at the Holiday Inn. I had been gunning for the Econo Lodge, being cheaper, but Brian convinced me that we were already in an incredibly depressing city, why stay in an even more depressing hotel, and I agreed to his logic and consented. We walked over to the deserted Beale Street, which isn't much to look at anyway, picked up some BBQ from a place called alternatively Pig on Beale or Pork with Attitude, then headed back to our hotel via the empty side streets. We got back and, feeling restless, I went to the gym, but not before

reading the safety instructions about how to never let anyone in your room, never open the door to anyone ever, and to keep your personal belongings with you at all times. I also promised Brian I would keep the phone near me and call or text if there were any problems, but of course we were getting ourselves hyped up over nothing except a desolate feeling, and my thirty minutes in the little gym went off without a hitch.

I came back up, we ate, and watched The Boiler Room. We ordered room service for desert and wine. We pretended we were at home in New York or LA. We relaxed. We got excited to go home. We fell asleep.

January 19, 2011 – The Day of Tennessee

We were eager to get the hell out of Memphis, but not so eager that we would skip the National Civil Rights Museum.

Brian got up early and went for his own run, while I stared at my computer and tried to do a little work. When he got back, we got dressed, checked out, and headed for our car. It was freezing outside – I keep forgetting that winter hits even the south – and while I got settled in the passenger seat, Brian got out to clip his fingernails. He was approached by a member of the staff, and I was concerned, looking in the rearview mirror, that he was about to be reprimanded for being such a vagabond. Instead, according to Brian, the guy looked at our license plate, and asked Brian if he was from California. Yes. Where? LA. Where? San Pedro. Me too!

Turns out the guy had grown up in San Pedro, then lived right near where Brian had lived while he was attending USC. The guy had been in a few gangs he said, and showed Brian his bullet wounds, before informing that he wasn't allowed to go back to California and so had moved to Memphis. They chatted for awhile longer before saying their goodbyes, and Brian and I drove off.

We headed to the edge of downtown, to the Lorraine Hotel where Dr. King was shot. It has been converted into the National Civil Rights Museum, and I had heard from Hannah that it was really impressive. We went in, paid and started a very intricate journey through the history of the struggle. The museum is laid out on a timeline, laid out with facts, quotes, images, that leads you through the museum. The first room has the time line around the edge of room, starting in the 1600s and going until the Civil War. The second room is the Civil War through the 1940s. There are little biographies of important people and events, so many facts and words that after trying to read everything in the first two rooms, we decided that if we wanted to get through it all we'd have to start skimming a bit. The third room started our journey through the modern day civil

rights movement, and led us in each room through the major milestones, now adding statues and videos and installations, like a recreation of the lunch counter where sit ins were held, or the bus where Rosa Parks took a stand, or a burned down Freedom Bus. The exhibit led you step by step, through each part of history, and you watched on TV as screaming whites attacked people sitting in, or a woman claimed that “its a violation of MY civil rights if someone says you HAVE to serve me.” We read the letter from a Birmingham jail, we listened to the I Have a Dream Speech, all the while winding our way through the decade and a half before King was shot.

What was particularly astonishing to me was the rhetoric used by white supremacists. Kennedy is a Russian spy! The freedom fighters are trying to incite race riots to undermine America! Communism! Socialism! Plots by the government to take over! States rights no matter what! We like the status quo and anyone who doesn't isn't a REAL American! Sound familiar?

The whole exhibit ends looking out over the balcony where King was shot, looking into his room where he was staying at the Lorraine. And then you turn around and look out over the wall back into the museum and literally see the path that led to that point. It's powerful. The whole museum is powerful. I was seriously impressed.

As we left, I thought about the fact that, according to a film we watched upon entering, the city had let the Lorraine Hotel go to pot and was going to auction it off 20 years ago when a group of valiant souls stepped in to save it. All of them were black. At one point in the movie, one person says something about how he guesses he can understand why the state officials didn't seem to care about what happened to the building – they hadn't experienced the triumph of the movement, the sacrifice and the importance the way he had. I understand too, but it still startled me to find out that no one but a few people seemed to care about what happened to the building where King last stood. I thought about it as I walked out into the gray deserted Memphis day, and thought about it when Brian acknowledged out loud that Memphis had been Birmingham-ed.

We found a little coffee shop and went for a sandwich and coffee before heading out. On the walls were images of Memphis in the 1950s, bustling and busy and full. We went back to our car, and drove north along the Mississippi until we found the highway that would lead us east. We still had a couple of days to kill, so we decided to head across the state to Knoxville and the Smokies. We wouldn't get there today, but we would tomorrow, and it seemed like an interesting drive.

It was an ok drive. We listened to This American Life. We stared out the window. We ended up in Pulaski after dark and decided to stay the night.

We wanted some bread and cheese, but couldn't find a super market. Wanna

know why? Walmart. Man, fuck that place.

We continued to search in vain and ended up finding a little supermarket which did not have what we were looking for. It did, however, have molasses made by a local molasses-maker, local honey, relatively local jam, and something called chow-chow, also locally created and jarred. There were locally made pig rinds (which, now that I know what they are, I can't fathom actually eating), and locally cured hams. All this in the context of a perfectly normal market, selling all the usual stuff and only Kraft cheese. It was so cool that I tried to convince Brian to buy some black strap, but he asked what we would do with it and when I replied "Eat it" I knew I was beat.

So we were resigned to Walmart, and we drove there in a funk. As we pulled into the parking lot, however, we noticed a Mexican restaurant. Brian got all excited, as he always does when he sees an option for Mexican food and I, though skeptical about the quality of Mexican food located in a Walmart parking lot in the middle of nowhere Tennessee, consented because that's how much I hate Walmart.

Well, shut my mouth and call me a snob. That place was great! It was real Mexican American food, like the kind you might find in LA or San Francisco. Quality meat, a little spicy, and top notch salsa (always a good sign). The people were incredibly friendly and I had a huge and very un-authentic margarita that I just adored. We sat there, I talked about gender bending while more conservative Tennessee residents glanced back nervously, and then we headed to our a little hotel room in a non-chain motel. Some basketball, some crosswording, and a very satisfied sleep in the heartland.

January 20, 2011 – The Day of Traversing Tennessee

It's funny to drive all the way across a state that you had planned on pretty much skipping entirely.

Of course, we have a few days to kill, but it still strikes me as odd that we have managed to drive from one end of the state to the other. Lengthwise.

We woke up in Pulaski, and considered briefly returning to that nifty supermarket and buying some local molasses. Luckily with the morning light had come clarity, and it no longer seemed like such a hot idea. I mean, really, what WOULD we do with it anyway? So we had a really really terrible bagel from the hotel (I mean, worst bagel I've ever had, and on this trip I've had some shitty bagels), and got on our way.

We were headed to Chattanooga. Well, actually, we were headed to Knoxville, but Chattanooga was on the way and we figured it might be a good place to stop for coffee. As we drove into town, I kept saying “Chattanooga Choo-Choo!” but couldn’t remember the tune or any of the lyrics or really even the context of the song so after a few times it got pretty old and I quit it.

We parked near the Tennessee River and wandered over to a yelped coffee shop. The town was hilly and plunged off into the wide water, with bridges spanning from one side to the other every few miles. The fence along the street where we parked, which kept us from tumbling down the cliffs, was dotted with cool pieces of glass and metal. I was smitten with Chattanooga, although on our drive in all we really saw were old school factories and quiet town under gray sky. I couldn’t really figure it out until I realized that this is the most northeastern city we’d been in. I mean, it’s not northeastern, but it reminded me of my mid-atlantic home – the old fashioned industrial air and the giant river, the cliffs and the sort of hunkered down feeling about the place. It reminded me of the areas near where my mother grew, and the towns along the Hudson River, and I began to feel homesick and eager to get back to a place I recognized. I’ve been in deserts and swamp and plains and tundra, and now it’s time to go home. We still have a bit left, but suddenly everything felt recognizable and that made me feel like a string was attached to my gut and was pulling me home.

We settled down in a little coffee shop near the water. We were planning to just get a couple of sandwiches to go, but decided that, with Knoxville just a stone’s throw away, we could afford to spend a few hours doing some work and getting organized. Besides, the place was nice and friendly and warm, even if the cute counter girl seemed a little vacant – a little unsure about what we were ordering and what we could actually get and how to pronounce the name of one of the pastries, but still good natured. We had a couple of excellent sandwiches and some very decent coffee (which was roasted just a block away), and got to work.

While we sat there, a couple of old ladies, who had been there before us, starting discussing politics. At first I hadn’t noticed, but then I saw a funny look on Brian’s face and when I asked him what was wrong, he let me know that the two were talking about their feelings on Obama. Now look, this is a free country and all, and you can have whatever ridiculous opinions you want, AND you can talk about them in a coffee shop. But really – I know you’re old and white and southern, but please drop the whole “Obama’s not a real American” bullshit – it’s racist and annoying and sort of unbelievably stupid. Besides, if you don’t, I get to exercise my own free right to glare aggressively at you and then roll my eyes repeatedly whenever you look my way. Which I did. And then Brian gave me the headphones because I think he was concerned that I might get up and go argue with them. He’s probably right. But don’t worry, I took the normal adult road and drowned them out instead.

We sat there for a few hours and then headed back out into the cold, caffeined up and ready to roll. Dusk was falling and in the gray gloom one of the bridges had turned on their giant snow flake lights, which fell in blue down the side of the suspension. We drove out across the river and north, next to the Appalachian mountains. I really wanted to go through them, but I think that will have to be an adventure for another (warmer) trip.

We pulled into Knoxville after dark, picked up some bread and cheese at a local supermarket and then headed to a Days Inn. Days Inns are, for those of you who care, one of the cheapest and cleanest options we've found. If you're wondering.

We ate bread and watched Ratatouille and fell asleep.

January 21, 2011 – The Day of Katie

Katie is my oldest friend. By that I mean, of course, that she has been my friend the longest, not that she's the oldest person I'm friends with. We became friends in kindergarten, as did our mothers, and then our fathers, and finally our brothers who are a year apart and both went to Collegiate. We went through all thirteen years at Brearley together, years which included many weekends spent upstate with both our families – sledding in the winter, swimming in the summer – birthdays, nights at their house, makeup parties before dances, sleepovers after dances, and my one and only church service. But what's most impressive about my relationship with Katie is that we've managed to maintain this friendship through college and into our adult years despite the fact that we have chosen very different career paths and have cultivated varying interests. Katie is a lawyer – she just graduated and is now clerking in Nashville and next year she will begin her law career in DC with her boyfriend Nick, also a lawyer. I am a theater artist who is currently living in a truck by choice, with a theater company that does not pay me and a scattered and patchy employment history. Our differences can in fact be summed up in a conversation we had this past spring over lunch while she was visiting New York. She mentioned that she had just bought a suit and was in need of another one. I snorted with laughter and surprise and then said in a you-must-be-crazy tone “You own a suit?!” to which Katie, eyeing me like I had just had a bought of amnesia, replied “Lillian. I'm a lawyer.” That about sums it up. And its one of the many reasons I value my relationship with her.

So when we set out on this trip, Nashville was immediately one of our objectives for the specific purpose of spending time with Katie.

But before we could get there we had to do laundry. Brian and I need to learn how to do laundry when our clothing options are in the “moderately urgent”

stage, not the “I’m wearing my underwear inside out for the second day in a row” stage, which is where we frequently end up.

We headed into Knoxville and did our laundry at a deserted little laundromat near the University of Tennessee campus. We managed to stuff all our clothes into the washer, set it going, and then took the thirty minutes we had to go walk around the school. Because of our limited time we never made it to the water, but we did manage to walk a couple of rather intimidating hills and stroll around the campus before returning to our spinning load. It’s nice. It’s not amazing, but it’s nice. It seems like a fun place to go to school. I don’t know, we spent like ten minutes there, but that was my impression.

We got back, took our clothes out of the washer, threw them in the drier, read some of the cookbook I gave to Brian for Christmas, took our now hot and dry clothes out, folded them (is this interesting enough yet?), and jumped back in the car. Brian had some (paid!) work to do, and I had some... nothing to do, so we headed over to a coffee shop on the other side of town. It was really cute, in a little residential neighborhood that didn’t look like it would have anything commercial and then up popped this coffee shop. It was pretty and I bet it’s beautiful in the spring. We sat for a couple of hours, did our work, drank our coffee, and then headed to Nashville to see Katie.

We got into town as the dark was falling and headed to her house. Katie lives in a little suburban neighborhood relatively near the downtown. We parked and headed to her door, but were confused because the house is split in two and we weren’t sure which door was hers. After sneaking creepily around the wrong side of the house, we found her door (which was, embarrassingly, off a walk way and totally obvious), knocked and were let in.

Katie’s house is adorable, although perhaps lacking in decoration. The only problem with her house is that it isn’t well insulated, because Nashville hasn’t come to terms with its wintery fate, so she loses a tremendous amount of money on heating. Therefore, she keeps the heat low, and the space heater available. She showed us around, we gave her some beer we’d bought, and then the three of us sat and drank for a while, chatting, catching up. Then we headed out on foot into her neighborhood for some dinner.

I was sort of expecting the whole place to be extremely residential and suburban – not the kind of place where there’d be anything going on, but I was mistaken. Katie has a couple of boutiques, two coffee shops and four or five restaurants all within walking distance. We chose the Blind Pig, looking forward to their pork options, but they were – gasp – all out of pork. Um, what? Their other food was excellent, and it made me think that their pork must be especially good. While we ate, Katie wowed Brian with her extensive sports knowledge. Then we headed back, had a bourbon to, you know, guard against the cold, and fell asleep on her

really rather magnificent blow up bed. It's like a real bed! It's going to be a great weekend.

January 22, 2010 – The Day of the Nashville Honky-Tonk

Nashville is cool.

I thought it would be, and I was not disappointed.

We woke up maybe slightly dehydrated, got dressed, and headed to the nature preserve. It is, apparently, the largest nature preserve inside an urban area in the country. We drove twenty minutes or so, parked, and headed off into the snowy forest. Katie told us that she brings everyone who visits here, and I could see why. The park was quiet and peaceful, covered in snow, and the trail we took led us past this giant lake. Plus, there were a ton of deer standing right near the trail as we passed by, like those deer that Brian and I saw in Yosemite. They're so beautiful and easy going, and they just wait patiently while you pass within feet of them, totally unafraid. We must have seen at least fifteen deer. It made me wish New York had more greenery.

We finished our little hike and then headed to one of Katie's local coffee shops, the Portland Brew. Katie had wanted to go to the Frothy Monkey, but it was full up and the Brew was empty so we grabbed some reading materials from her house and headed there for a few hours. I had an excellent omelette and my coffee was fantastic, and while the walls are bare, the ceilings are high and the music was opera (more coffee shops should play opera, in my opinion). We passed a couple of hours there reading and chatting.

While we were there, I went outside and called my grandfather to let him know that we were planning a visit in the next couple of days. It was initially pretty disconcerting because when he got on the phone, he couldn't figure out who I was, which made me nervous, thinking that perhaps he'd had a stroke. He asked me to spell my name, and then asked how we were related. It turns out he's not senile, just deaf, and when he finally understood who I was he was very pleased and then said "You're like a stranger to me" which is, you know, true, and also something he would say. I told him we were heading up on Tuesday, he got very excited, then went into another room to show his girlfriend, Alice, pictures of me and my brother. Then Alice got on the phone (Alice hears just fine), and arranged the details. Tuesday, 1pm. My grandfather got back on and asked how I was getting there and when I told him we were driving he laughed and told me I was "a gutsy female." As I hung up the phone, excited that I'd get to see him after

four years absence, I turned and noticed the myriad of hipsters next door, picking out for sale clothes, who were all staring at me. I had been shouting so that my grandfather could hear me, and must have looked absolutely ridiculous, pacing back and forth and yelling into the phone. I slunk back inside and returned to my coffee.

From there, we walked over to the neighborhood near Vanderbilt, where we strolled and window shopped. The streets we walked to get there were pretty with nice houses, and I was impressed by how easy it was to get from Katie's neighborhood to a completely different place. The area is totally walkable, and has cool stuff going on. Lots of hipsters – it felt for a minute like strolling through Williamsburg – but neat and interesting and definitely a great place to live.

We returned to Katie's house, where Brian fixed her DVD and we watched the first half of High Fidelity (just to see if it worked), and then we headed back into downtown. Katie drove us past the courthouse where she works, the various municipal buildings built in the 70s, and over the river into the east side of town, where the hipsters live (I mean, they seem to live everywhere, but apparently this is really an up and coming newly gentrified hipster neighborhood). We parked, had a beer at a local bar, and then drove over to get some hot chicken. I'd never heard of Hot Chicken before, but it is apparently a Nashville favorite, and Katie had never had it before so it seemed like the obvious choice for dinner. We picked up some hot chicken and some hot catfish and headed back over the bridge and through the lit city to Katie's house.

Hot chicken is no joke. That was the spiciest food I've ever had in my life. I mean, it was work to consume it. It was painfully hot. We ate it in between sips of beer. I had the catfish, which was lucky because it wasn't quite as intense, but the chicken was out of this world. As we sucked in air to cool our mouths, Katie informed us that it's not even the spiciest hot chicken in town – that there's a place where you're not allowed to get anything other than mild hot chicken because the really hot hot chicken is just too intense.

We finished our chicken and sat for awhile processing it. Brian had turned bright red, and slowly his face returned to a normal color. We finished High Fidelity. We put on our boots and coats. We headed to the honky-tonks.

I have to admit, I really knew nothing about Nashville before arriving. I'm not much of a researcher, and I'm easy to please, and mostly I also know that Katie is an excellent planner. She said that we had to go bar hopping downtown to listen to country music, and while I had no idea why or what that entailed, I have spent enough years with Katie to know that she was probably right. So downtown we went, and started off our four bar tour at Legends.

Well, I am hear to tell you that the honky-tonks are great and anyone who

doesn't think so is not getting the spirit. All along this one street there are bars and people and music. Each bar has a stage, and each stage contains a band playing covers of the top ten country hits with a few odd ones thrown in for good measure. I know no country music, but everyone else did – everyone was singing along, loudly, with tunes I'd never even heard before. Katie had put country music on all day in the car, but it did not prepare me for the country music explosion in downtown Nashville.

Now, I know. For those of you who are not country music fans, the idea of listening to simple, literalist ballads about lost love and adoring being an American and maybe a gun or two is not your idea of a good time. It wasn't mine either. Which should make it even clearer how much fun the honky-tonk bars are. Everyone's drunk. Everyone's dancing, or at least bopping along. Everyone's shouting. Everyone's going from place to place, taking in one band after another.

Legends was comparatively empty, with older people and a band with a pretty cool girl lead singer, whose blouse could maybe have been buttoned one more button. The guys wore big ten gallon hats, most people wore cowboy boots, and everyone had an unpretentious beer.

Tootsies, where we headed next, was super crowded, but we found some empty space near the men's room, and listened to a very cocky, good looking singer play a couple of the same songs and some that we hadn't heard. Then we headed to the upstairs bar where a different band was playing rock music and we got into a long discussion with a guy from New Jersey and his buddy who, at one point, pulled lint out of his belly button. Really. He actually did that. We left shortly thereafter.

We headed to another bar that I can't remember the name of and managed to get a table. We sat for awhile listening to the band, and then to the juke box while the band switched, chatting. Eventually the astonishing amount of cigarette smoke got to us and we moved on.

The final place was called Robert's, and was the strangest of the three. Their band, headed by a British guy, played sort of stranger, older and more obscure country songs, but there we were able to have a hot dog and some fries, which was fine by me. We managed at least one bud light per bar, and by the time we left downtown around 1am, were decently drunk. We'd watched a girl attempt rather aggressively to get laid at multiple bars by singing along with the band and pointing and sitting on the stage and shouting in general. We'd watched girls dancing on top of tables in front of a band. We'd seen girls in tiny skirts and heels despite the frigid weather. We'd seen guitars and violins and basses hanging on walls, and hundreds of signed photographs from country stars I'd never heard of. In short, we had a blast. It was one of my favorite nights on this trip.

January 23, 2011 – The Day of Skipping Kentucky

Remember Washington? Remember Wyoming? Well, we can proudly add Kentucky to that list.

We woke up miraculously not hungover. Actually it wasn't that miraculous, considering we'd had a bunch of water and some ibuprofen before bed. We got up and headed out to the Frothy Monkey, where I had an omelet and some coffee and we chatted for a bit before walking back over to the house. We were eager to beat encroaching weather, so we said our goodbyes and thank yous and then we headed out around 11am.

And then we skipped Kentucky.

I didn't really want to, but the weather was coming and now we had my grandfather to visit on Tuesday, so it was sort of necessary. That said, I want to return. I bet (as has become my mantra) it's beautiful when it's warm.

Kentucky is sort of surprisingly petite, at least from top to bottom. We made it to Louisville around 3pm, without any snow or any hitch. I had been excited for Louisville, as I had once driven around it at night and thought it was pretty. But as I've learned, almost anything looks good in the dark.

Louisville was not pretty, or at least not as pretty as I had hoped it would be. It is on a river, and it does have some nice old buildings, but it's all sort of dwarfed and small. We were exhausted and hungry when we got into town, and I wanted to park in the first reasonably priced hotel we could find, but Brian insisted on calling multiple places and then driving over to another place when they promised a deal. I was pissed.

I shouldn't have been. Our hotel was awesome. I mean, not unique/awesome, but roomy/comfortable/better than a Days Inn or Best Western/awesome. We were ecstatic, which might give you a sense of how tired of the truck we are. We dropped our stuff and then headed to the store for some food. We had a stove top, so we decided to make some pasta, and when we found ravioli, our joy just went through the roof. I hope we remain this easy to please after we return home to a normal routine. We also grabbed some chips and salsa for immediate consumption, and raced back to the hotel. No exploring today. Today was hotel fun day.

We ate our chips, Brian watched the football game and I took a brief snooze. Then it was time for the Jets game (J-E-T-S!). Well, we all know how that went.

What a bummer. I think my stress levels were high enough without the added pressure of being a sports fan. Dammit.

January 24, 2011 – The Day of Shuffling to Indiana-polis

I used to get really depressed when I went to midwest.

This is not to offend anyone who lives there or is from there. I just grew up with a certain stigma attached to it because my father came from Kansas and hated it and always made sure that we knew how much he hated it, so every time I find myself somewhere flat I get sort of down. But when I was a kid and generally a little easily distressed, I used to just feel sick. All that space and flatness and all those strip malls and family history – well, I just ended up in a puddle of existential mud, contemplating my own mortality.

No more (lucky Brian), but I still can't love Indiana. My grandfather has lived there for almost a decade, after coming from Texas. It makes sense – he's originally from Illinois and Indiana probably reminds him of his boyhood home. I guess. Except his boyhood was spent in completely rural Illinois out on the northeast 1000 working on the James' farm, while his old age is spent in a retirement community in the middle of Fort Wayne. So, then again, maybe not. Anyway, I have always failed to be impressed by Indiana, and today was no exception.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. We started out our day at our hotel, before heading out to a coffee shop for food. Actually, we were headed to a nearby restaurant, but it and everything around it looked closed, so we hopped in the car and headed to a neighborhood closer to the college campus. It seemed to also be the Irish neighborhood, which is, you know, fine and interesting, I guess. The coffee shop was OK – it seemed to me that the baristas were just a little snobbier than their abilities should allow, but I didn't mind that much. What I did mind was the screaming child. I'm not talking about a baby – I'm talking about a couple of four year olds who spent a good hour running back and forth in the crowded coffee shop, screaming and banging into the door right near Brian and me while the mothers did absolutely nothing. I understand. You have a child. That child is under the age of ten and therefore noisy and child-like. However, you are an adult and, in theory, in charge, and when your child is disturbing everyone in a public setting, it is your job to quiet that child or leave. It is not appropriate to subject everyone else to your child's every playful whim. We are not in playground or your home. Keep your child under control.

Well, that didn't happen, despite the angry looks I (and I assume everyone else) was giving the mothers. They left on their own good time, but not before their children screamed and slammed themselves into the door at least twelve times. But once they left, the coffee shop quieted down and we were able to get stuff done.

We left, and headed back over to the downtown area. I had a desire to see the Actors Theatre of Louisville, a place friends of mine had worked and a sort of beacon of regional theater excellence. We drove around until we found it, parked and started to venture in when we noticed the parking police. So Brian headed back to put some change in the meter and I wandered in. On my way up the steps, a woman came out to smoke a cigarette. I decided to look casual and went to open the door.

"Do you need help?" the woman asked, sensing my pounding heart.

"Oh, uh, I'm a theater artist from New York and I was just wondering if I could... you know, look around," at which point I realized how absolutely weird and presumptuous a request this was.

"Oh sure! Go on in!"

Surprised and grateful, I headed into the old converted bank, with its high, painted ceilings, and stole to the back to the theater. No one was there, but the lights were on to reveal a very sweet little auditorium with a really fantastic set in place. The whole place smelled like greasepaint, and it made me want to get back home and get back to work. I stood there, taking it in, and the woman from outside appeared behind me.

"Do you want me to show you around?"

"Oh! Yes, that'd be wonderful!"

She took me to the smaller theater next door, then we met up with Brian and went to the black box upstairs. All the while she told me about how the theater works and what gets done there usually. She told me about the Humana Festival and the apprentice program. When I asked where they rehearse, she took me through the basement to the rehearsal studios next door. She was incredibly friendly and helpful and I was so happy I'd met her. What a really nice thing, to take time out of your day, before a meeting, to show around two complete strangers who just randomly show wanting to see the theater. I was sold – this place is great.

We walked out and wandered around Main Street, searching for food. Not much, but we did eventually find a coffee shop that served pretty decent paninis. We got two to go and headed back to the car. Then, we headed to Indiana.

Actually, not yet. We made a quick stop.

Four years ago, I went with my theater collective from Vassar to Kentucky. We were doing a show called *The Trestle* at Pope Lick Creek, and there is, actually, a trestle at a place called Pope Lick Creek, which is (unsurprisingly) where the play is set. So we took off, six of the eight of us, and went to the trestle as a sort of research/bonding excursion. It was awesome – a little pilgrimage in its own right – and we spent a whole day rehearsing and playing under the bridge, almost getting hit by a train. When we came back, it informed a lot of our set and our characters, and on opening night we sprinkled dirt from the Kentucky ground on our stage before we let the audience in. Needless to say, it was a pretty important experience in my college career, and I figured, since we were right here...

We drove to the trestle. We only drove by it, we didn't get out, but it was cool all the same. It was nice to see it again, and it was nice for Brian to see it, although I know it didn't mean as much to him as it did to me.

And then we went to Indiana.

And there's not much to say. We drove to Indianapolis, looked at the city in the evening, and went to a Days Inn (I'd like to point out here that every Days Inn is extremely larger, including in small towns, and always sort of disturbingly empty). We grabbed some Five Guys burgers and watched *Family Guy*. We got ready to see my grandfather the following day.

We went to sleep.

January 25, 2011 – The Day of Granddaddy Meredith

To say that I have a complicated relationship with my extended Meredith family would be putting it mildly. I guess complicated isn't exactly the right word. It's more that I don't really have any relationship with them whatsoever. I haven't seen my cousins, aunt or uncle in over a decade, and my grandfather only rarely during that time. The last time I paid my grandfather a visit was four years ago on my pilgrimage journey, and the last time he came to our house was probably two or three years before that. Let's just say that it's a little intense on that end, and leave it there.

However, I have tried, in my own small way, to maintain contact with granddad. He is a fundamental part of who I am, mostly because of the ways in which he influenced my father. And it's important to me to have a sense of where I come

from.

So, we made the trip to Fort Wayne.

My grandfather lives with his girlfriend Alice (nicknamed Tiny Alice by my mother, which was initially because it's a reference that my mother finds amusing, but also because it turns out that she is indeed petite) in a retirement community on the outskirts of town. They have managed to remain almost completely independent there, taking their meals in the main building but otherwise living in a little cottage by themselves, which is impressive considering they're both in their early nineties.

We were scheduled to be there at 1, but arrived about a half hour early. I was nervous, which I guess was odd considering I was seeing family, but then again, as my grandfather had aptly put it two days prior, "you're like a stranger to us" and that was how I felt walking up to the door.

I needn't have worried. My grandfather was delighted to see me. He's almost completely deaf, so the next four hours were spent shouting and repeating. I showed him my theater website, showed him my brother's bio, showed him beastranger. He showed us a series of strange things, like the paper they signed when they took his car a few weeks ago, or a bunch of pictures showing a side of the family that I don't know and can't recall ever having met. He did, however, show me a few pictures of my cousin Derek, his fiancée and their new baby, all of whom had come to visit in December. The baby is adorable and looks just like Derek, and Derek seems attentive and strong and proud. Granddad talked about how proud he was of my father and of me and of my brother. He has a room in the back of the house dedicated to all his pictures – all of my mother's creative Christmas cards hung up on the wall and a cork board of pictures tacked nearby. He has images on the floor, in frames, and in envelopes. The rest of the house is pristine, but this room is a disaster – it reminds me, actually, of my father's office, just papers everywhere. This is where my grandfather keeps his memories and probably all his regrets.

Luckily for him, that's only afforded one room in the house, and I have a feeling that's because of Alice. Alice is wonderful. She's chipper and upbeat and funny. She listens when you talk and asks questions, and she has a remarkable vivacity and enjoyment of life. At one point she got up and demonstrated that she could touch her toes. At another, she talked about how she was going to root for the Packers in the Super Bowl. I love her, and I'm really grateful she's who my grandfather gets to spend the end of his life with.

They took us over to the main building, Alice on my arm, Brian following my grandfather. They showed us around – the exercise room, the library, the meeting room. We ended up eating dinner there with them, watching my 92 year old grandfather salt everything and feeling much better about my own sodium

intake. Chatting with Alice, feeling bad because my grandfather couldn't hear. The staff was pleasant but detached. The food was terrible.

Then we walked them back over to the house and said our goodbyes.

In the end, I don't know that I came away with any stronger sense of my grandfather. He was mad when I tried to help him up, he was impressed by my posture, he kept trying to usher us out the door and make it easy for us to leave even though I know he was excited to see us (and Alice kept scolding him for it), he was embarrassed when he spilled a glass of water, he seems sad and regretful and then also totally content with Alice, he still refers to my grandmother (who is dead and whose ashes lie in an urn somewhere in that house) as his wife, and he was reluctant to let us go. I don't know much about him, really; I don't know what kind of father he was or why I don't ever see him or how he came to be who he is today. I know facts – like that he was a dirt farmer in Illinois and hated it, that he got out because he got a fifty dollar scholarship and went to college, and then the army, and then more college on the GI bill, and then he married my grandmother and had two boys and worked as a traveling bookkeeper, and then retired and lived in a mobile home and traveled, and then lived in Texas, and then moved to Indiana when my grandmother died. But in the end, that's just chronology. I see a lot of my father in him, and I see a lot of who my father isn't in him. And I love him, even though I barely know him. And I was really happy to see him. And I hope I get to see him again. It's complicated.

We said our goodbyes and they waved and waved until we were out of sight. Then Brian and I drove to Toledo. Not for any particular reason, but because that was how far we made it before we decided we were not ready to drive any more. We found a Lebanese restaurant on yelp, ate a whole lot of lamb for far too much money, and then found a Days Inn and slept.

January 26, 2011 – The Day of Ending in Erie

We awoke in Toledo and got the hell out of there.

I have to say, one of the great pleasures of speeding up this trip is the fact that we won't have to be in so many god awful places so often. Now, to be fair to Toledo, we didn't spend much time there. It could be a lovely place – but it certainly wasn't appealing enough to stick around and find out.

So we headed east. Ah, east. Towards home. Our plan was to get as far as Buffalo, but with a quick lunch stop in Cleveland with my friend Allie from Vassar. On our way, we had our second experience with almost running out of gas – the other one was in BC Canada, which makes sense since it's deserted, but

it turns out its as hard to find a gas station off of the 80/90 in Ohio as it is in the tundra. We did, barely, make it on fumes into a gas station well off the highway and made it to Cleveland.

Well, our quick lunch break turned into four hours, and needless to say, we didn't make it all the way to Buffalo.

But that is more than OK. We had a great time. Allie lives with her parents in the home she grew up in while trying to figure out what her next step is. I can relate to this state of limbo – I have been in and out of it since graduating almost four years ago. It's the joy of majoring in Drama and then wondering if its really what you want to do. Anyway, Allie and her mother were home and we had turkey and cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. Allie's mother is a wonderful, kind woman, and she sat and chatted with us as well. We talked about the trip, and what Allie had been up to, and Allie showed us the masks that she makes during her free time. They are awesome and beautiful, and she gave us a mini wolf one to take with us, which brings the awesome creative gifts people have given us on this journey up to two.

After sitting around the kitchen for a few hours, we said goodbye to Allie's mother, and drove with Allie over to a local coffee shop. There, Brian had a video meeting with a client of his, and Allie and I had a chance to really catch up. We sat there until dusk, at which point Brian pointed out that it might be a good idea to head out. Buffalo was still three hours away and it was icy on the roads. So, we said goodbye, and forged on.

We spent an uneventful hour or so until we hit some serious weather. Brian is an excellent driver, but neither he nor the beast ranger is used to inclement weather, so we decided to pull into the Pennsylvania town of Erie, making Pennsylvania our twentieth state on the trip.

We checked into a Days Inn off the highway, settled in for the night, and then suddenly realized we were hungry. Damn. The snow was coming down, and nothing was open except for a place a few miles back on the highway. So we loaded ourselves back into the car and white knuckled it while going thirty. We got a pizza and slowly headed back. We were lucky, and made it back to our hotel without an accident so that we could have our pizza and eat it too. Which is exactly what we did. Then it was Daily Show and Colbert Report and then sleep.

January 27-28, 2011 – The Days of Tom

We spent the next few days at my brother's college in upstate New York, where we drank far too much, hung out with my brother and his housemates, and

watched many episodes of The League.

It was a blast. My brother is awesome.

I'm not going to go into it too much because frankly the trip was pretty much over. It was a great way to spend the last days of the trip. It was a celebration and a premature return home, and it was perfect. I couldn't have asked for a nicer way to culminate this experience.

January 29, 2011 – The Final Day and the Great Surprise

So, my mother didn't know we were coming home early.

She knew we were speeding up, but I had told her that after seeing my grandfather, we were going to go straight to DC, and be back maybe mid-February. You have to understand, I don't lie to my parents. That sounds like an exaggeration, or else if not, it makes me look like the most annoying person on earth. But it's not that. I'm a terrible liar. I hate saying things that aren't true, especially to people I love, especially when I know the truth will make them happy.

My mother has been very valiant. She has never been a fan of this trip, but has kept her mouth shut and been supportive, knowing that it was important to me and that I was going to do it regardless of what she thought. I know how tense and anxious she's been the past few months with me sleeping in the back of the truck on the street and in parking lots. Actually, I don't know. I can guess, however, and it must have been awful – a perfect example of how you never get to stop being a parent. And I've felt bad about it, and I wanted to do something nice for her, and I figured what could be nicer than surprising her by coming home early. Obviously, the surprise was also for my father, but he's always thought the trip was kind of cool, and while he's been anxious, too, my mother has suffered more acutely, and has wished me home more often.

After making brunch for Tom and his housemates, we said goodbye and headed to the city. I had talked to my mother the night before. She had called to ask when I was coming home, and sounded so sad when I told her a few weeks that I almost broke and told her the truth right then. I managed to keep my mouth shut, although my astonishing ineptitude at lying almost gave me away: "So where are you now?" "Oh.. Maryland..." "Where in Maryland?" "Um... some little town..."

The phone call was lucky, however, because it gave me a chance to find out

where my parents were going to be at what time. It turns out they were headed to a movie at 4:30, so I planned to meet them outside. I told my mother to keep her cell phone on, to which she replied “OK – unless I forget.”

“Well, I’m telling you I’m going to call you tomorrow at 6:30 so turn your phone on after the movie.”

“OK, well if you can’t reach me, just call the apartment.”

“NO just keep your phone on!”

“OK if I remember”

And so on.

So, Brian and I drove back to New York. It didn’t really hit me that I was heading home until we saw the GWB rising out of the appropriately gray sky. And it struck me that I haven’t been gone all that long. I spent almost four months living out of a car, traveling around the country, and now I’m coming back and soon it will be like it never happened. That was a sobering thought, but at the same time, I was excited – excited to get a job, excited to move into an apartment with Brian, excited to see my friends, and excited to see my parents.

We got in around 5:30 and went through the excruciating process of not only parking the beast ranger on the streets of the UWS, but parking among high piles of snow. We eventually slid into a mushy spot, locked and double checked the car, and walked down to the movie theater.

Nothing had changed. Well, of course, nothing had changed. A Magnolia Bakery here, an empty store front there, but on the whole everything looked the way it had looked when I’d left, which is much the way it has looked ever since I was born. I thought about the fact that the trip was over, that I was about to return to my family, that Brian and I were about to have a normal life and a normal relationship situation.

We waited on the corner, behind the phone booth, waiting for them to come out of the side door. Eventually they walked out and I frantically got out my phone. It rang and rang, but my mother across the street made no movement to pick it up. Of course. So Brian and I sprinted across the street and walked up behind them as they crossed Broadway. As they neared the island, I said “Excuse me.”

My parents turned around. My mother’s eyes grew wide and she stared at me for at least five seconds without saying anything. And then she said “Oh my god” and hugged me like I might disappear. She was misty. My father was speechless. It was wonderful.

We took a cab uptown. We went to my parents’ apartment. We ordered pizza,

drank some wine, talked. Then Brian and I retired to my brother's room. Tomorrow, we would start our respective job searches. Tomorrow, we would get reacquainted with our new home. But tonight, we concluded our journey with all the joy and excitement and gratitude that it deserved.

Final Thoughts

Has anything really changed?

When I set out on this journey with Brian, I had a plan. I was going to write lots of poetry. I was going to stop drinking coffee and start waking up early and generally detoxify. I was, I just knew, going to have a life altering experience with far reaching consequences.

And while I tried to temper my expectations, the truth is, I really did think that.

Well, let's take stock, shall we?

I wrote almost no poetry, and the poetry I did write I hated. To be fair to me, I didn't think about the fact that having no free time and not much to occupy myself with would lead to a certain stagnation. It is unbelievably hard for me, someone who is not actually by trade a writer, to find quiet space in my head when I am within a foot of another person at all times. I was really bothered by this about a month into the trip, but I have since come to terms with it. I did not write the poetry I wanted to write, but I wrote a lot of other stuff that I'm pleased with on this site. And I've learned that a certain amount of solitude is necessary for personal thoughts and undisclosed ideas.

I drank two or three cups of coffee every day and by the end was consuming so much fried food that I'm afraid I've come home a few pounds heavier. And it turns out, I don't care. I set out very spartan in my approach to this trip, but the truth is, it was so much better when I was taking in all aspects of each place, not just the sites and sounds but the tastes as well. Eating is a huge part of life. So are the little comforting pleasures, like a good cup of joe and a cookie. From LA to Alaska and back down to Santa Fe, I might have been gnawing on granola, but I was missing the real picture. After Santa Fe, the world got much brighter, and the trip much more enjoyable.

But was it life changing?

In the epic, all encompassing way I had been hoping for? No.

But did I learn anything? Yes, I think I did, although it is subtle.

I spent a great deal of time on this trip pondering my own mortality. I didn't really write about it because what kind of awful downer would this website have been then. And of course, pondering my ultimate and unknown demise is not exactly a new activity. But once I gave in to the fact that I was going to spend every evening before bed contemplating eternity, I realized why. I have always been so afraid of being alone, of no one remembering me, of leaving and no one caring. And while I hardly cut off contact with the outside world, I did leave everything behind and voyage off with an unknown return date. And people cared sometimes, and other times they didn't. Who knows if anyone other than Brian's and my immediate family was keeping tabs on this trip, but at some point I realized it didn't matter. Because the truth is, I can't depend on other people to care about me for me. This may seem obvious, and to those of you who don't know me very well, a sort of strange conclusion to come to. But I have spent a great deal of time in my life caring desperately that everyone be thinking about me all the time, that I am always favorably in everyone else's thoughts, and that if they don't miss me when I'm not there then I must be failing in some way.

And here's the thing: I just had this incredible journey, doing something I've always wanted to do, and no one will really understand. Who knows if I've been missed? And frankly, who cares? I did this for me, not for people to realize how much they miss me and to shower me with affection upon my return. I am, fundamentally and for all eternity, alone. And that's a good thing. Only I can reward me with love and praise, and so I better start learning how to cut out all the noise and be content with me. And I don't think I've learned how, but at least I've learned that I can learn.

And it brings me back to the quote that started the beast ranger website. Because it wasn't originally beast ranger, it was be a stranger, and the quote was from a long essay I wrote to myself after living in San Francisco for seven months. When I got there, I knew only one person. I had an unpaid internship and no idea how to get a job. I was alone. I had been afraid that I would get scared or trapped in my own head, that I would get depressed and lonely. But what ended up happening was that I was liberated, free from worrying about my friends and family, free from the need to please everyone and the anger that accompanies it. If you're already alone, you can't get any lonelier. It taught me that being a stranger, taking time to be alone and not constantly trying and frequently failing to prove myself, is fundamental to my happiness. And I remembered that on this trip. And now its time to try again to implement that in my life back at home.

So, here I am, back to looking for jobs, back to comparing myself to everyone in my field and taking notes on why I'm not as successful, wondering how I can compete, and worried that no one will understand what this trip meant to me.

And then I take a breath. And I remember Canada, the endless road. Or Alaska

and all that space. Or Santa Fe and our parking space home. Or the swamps of the south east. Or the snowy midwest. Or the days with nothing and endless boredom. And I remember being alone – that I am alone. And that is a good thing, a meditative thing. And I hope I can hang onto it.

So thank you, beast ranger. Thank you, readers. Thank you, country. And thank you, Brian, for being my companion. I am grateful for this trip. And I am excited to be home.