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# 1

## plan a trip

“Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.”

JACK KEROUAC

**IT ALL STARTED WITH** a wedding. So many good stories do. There was a church, a big white dress, a bunch of bridesmaids, and then there was me. Getting ready alone. Driving to the ceremony alone. Sitting in the pew inches from friends, but still very much alone.

It wasn't the going alone part that bothered me. That much I had done at least a dozen times before. It was this strange feeling I was carrying with me—that may or may not have had anything to do with the wedding. It was a restlessness, a confusion, a tension. I was twenty-six years old, with a graduate degree under my belt and a job as a middle-school English teacher to show for it. This is what I had worked and waited for—what I had hoped would be the culmination of all my school loans, studying, and internships. This was supposed to be the climax—but it didn't feel like that. It felt like something was missing.

On the outside at least, many other things were coming together. I had been approved for a home loan, first of all. There was this beautiful condo in northwest Portland that had caught my eye, and I had decided to just see if I could buy it. It was quaint and small, barely big enough for just me, but it was walking distance to restaurants and boutiques and close to the highway I took to get to work. It was in the quiet part of the neighborhood, a few blocks from the commotion—just the way I liked it. And I had friends who lived within biking distance. I pictured dinner parties and dropping by just to say “hi” and calling at the last minute to see if we all wanted to grab dinner on one of Portland’s perfect summer nights. I couldn’t imagine anything better. And according to the broker I had talked to, I could afford it.

But every time I thought about taking the leap, something inside me resisted. It just didn’t seem right. I didn’t want to buy a house all by myself.

My friend Erica, on the other hand, wouldn’t have to.

She looked beautiful as she made her way down the aisle to instrumental music, dragging tiny rose petals in her train trailing behind her. I was happy for her—I really was. I didn’t feel the dull ache of jealousy I had in the past watching wedding after wedding.

But I felt the tiniest twinge of sadness. She was about to cross the threshold into married life—a line I wasn’t sure I would ever cross—and things would never be the same. If I had learned anything in my twenty-six years, I had learned that.

Six years ago, it had happened to me for the first time, although there had been many others since. My college roommate got married. Before the wedding, we did everything together—eating together, doing homework together, watching afternoon reruns of *Dawson’s Creek* together, sitting awake together in a sterile hospital room as her dad slowly faded away from life, until the pressing

questions about God and life and what happens on the other side quietly subsided. But now, we didn't do anything together. She did all these things with her husband. Which meant I did everything alone. Including attend her wedding.

It was fine. I wasn't mad about it or anything. That's what you're supposed to do when you get married, right? You're supposed to do stuff with your husband. That's what getting married is all about, isn't it—the fact that you don't have to do stuff alone anymore. It's just that after several years of finding friends and getting attached to those friends, only to then watch them get married and lose them, you learn not to get too attached to anyone.

You don't disengage from friendships or give up on them forever, you just learn that they're more temporary than you once thought they were. You swear to yourself that you'll never be that way when you get married—but you know in your heart that the truth is, you probably will be—so you question if you even want to get married anyway. You learn the really important coping mechanism to single life: to be independent and take care of yourself. You learn to make the most about being alone.

That's exactly what I was thinking about as I watched Erica float down the aisle that day. I was thinking about how much I liked my single life, about how I didn't much mind being alone. I thought about how I could go anywhere I wanted to go, whenever I wanted to go there, and how I didn't have to ask permission before I spent money. I thought about how I could change jobs whenever I wanted, or move to a different part of town, or even a different city. I thought about how I was able to invest in my career, and my friendships, and my hobbies.

I wasn't just making this stuff up. I really felt it.

But as I sat in the pew and quietly watched Erica give her life to the man who stood in front of her, I couldn't get rid of this nag-

ging question in the back of my mind: *What was I supposed to give my life to?*

After the ceremony ended, I drove carefully through the rainy November night to the reception, where cute little finger food options were offered on trays in the perfectly appointed ballroom. I helped myself to a glass of wine and planted myself on a couch off to the side, where I could watch the party unfold from a distance. That is how I liked it. Life on the sidelines. Low risk. Low-key. And really entertaining.

It was a strategy I had developed a long time ago, without putting much thought into it. Since I didn't really love big crowds, any time I went to an event where I had to be in a room full of people, I would position myself on the fringe of the room. Preferably, I could have my back against an outside wall and plant myself there for the duration of the evening. Usually, I would bring some food with me—rations to sustain me for the night—and also something to make me look like I was busy. Sometimes I would carry a book in my purse; sometimes I would use my phone. Sometimes I would scribble notes in a little notebook.

The benefit of this strategy was that I got to keep tabs on everybody. I got to watch the token single guy make a fool of himself with every single girl in the room, introducing himself and recycling the same cheesy jokes over and over again. I got to watch the “important” people in the room try to downplay their importance, and everyone else try to prove how “important” they were. I could make fun of people (secretly, of course, in my head) for telling jokes that tanked, or for going in for a handshake while the other person went in for a hug—or the most tragic, mistaking a high five for a hug request. That was the worst.

The other benefit of my strategic sideling, I'll admit, is that no one could approach me from behind. This way, I was never

shocked by anything. If someone wanted to talk to me, they could approach me from the front, like a civilized partygoer. I'm not sure why that was such a big deal to me. I think there must have been one too many tragic "cover-your-eyes-from-behind" experiences buried in my high-school psyche. I could keep track of who was friends with who, and who appeared to be nice, and who appeared to be no fun at all.

From my spot on the wall I could watch the whole party unfold. It was like charting the course of the story, with all of its characters, all sticky and messy and wonderful.

And if someone did want to talk to me, they knew where to find me. After all, I didn't move for the entire party. I wasn't really hard to track down. When they came to talk to me, I would be there—ready, with my food prop in place and my tone of voice prepared to meet them enthusiastically (if they were "that" type) or intellectually (because I overheard them talking about the Pleistocene era, and I googled it so I could know what it was).

This was the way to do a party, if you asked me.

I watched my friend Sharaya, one of the bridesmaids, throw her head back in laughter talking to three guys, none of whom I had seen before. Her blonde hair was pinned in a loose up-do and her dress curved flatteringly around her figure. I had watched her at church before, leading worship from stage, and thought about how beautiful she was, how stylishly put together. But tonight, with her high heels and perfectly applied lipstick, she looked more elegant than ever.

I was jealous of people like that, if I'm being honest with you—people who always looked elegant even when they were in the mess of the party, people who seemed to float through life laughing and making the most out of everything.

The problem was, it was impossible to hate her. She was like a cartoon character, always smiling and giggling and swooping in and out of scene after scene with another exciting story. Sharaya was the type of girl who would disappear and show up a few days later, saying she just couldn't help but take a quick trip to Los Angeles or Australia. Whatever. She was always going on flying trips or sailing trips or horseback-riding trips. I could never figure out where she met all these people with horses or boats or airplanes. I wondered if maybe she could introduce me to some of them.

One time she was dropped off at a Sunday night church service gripping a bag full of her belongings. It all happened so quickly that I swear the car didn't even stop all the way as she tumbled out the door. "Hello everyone," she seemed to say as she sashayed into the crowd. "I'm sorry I'm late," she told us, even though she wasn't late at all. "I got tied up wakeboarding." I couldn't figure it out. Her clothes weren't wet or wrinkled in the slightest. Her skin was flawlessly tanned so that she glowed a little, almost like she was wearing makeup, but there were no signs of mascara or eyeliner smudges under her eyes. Her hair was air-dried in this whimsical little ponytail that looked so perfect as it bounced on top of her head.

Sharaya and I couldn't have possibly been more different. We looked different, first of all. She was blonde, petite, and impossibly athletic. Every time I saw her, I wondered what her secret was to keeping her arms so toned. I, on the other hand, was tall with long, dark hair and equally long, gangly limbs. I had recently taken up running, as was the trend in Portland at the time, but I didn't dare play group sports or do any activity where someone could accuse me of throwing like a girl (because I did).

Sharaya was also free-spirited and fun, always making interesting conversation and smiling, even when she was the brunt of

the joke. I was quieter—more serious but more imaginative too, the kind of girl who spends her weekends reading and organizing her closet.

And for my whole life, I had dreamed of being a writer.

When she walked up to me that night at the wedding, I should have known it would change my life forever.

The party was starting to pick up a bit. Everyone had eaten some food and the groom's younger brother had taken over the microphone, so just when things were starting to get interesting, Sharaya came and sat by me.

"Hey!" She greeted me warmly. "Want to come dance?" She might as well have been glowing.

"I don't think so . . ." I told her.

"Come on!" she urged. "It'll be fun!"

I told her I wasn't much of a dancer and, besides, if I came to dance I would have to put down my glass of wine, and I wasn't sure I was willing to make that trade right now.

"Fair enough," she conceded.

Outside the party, the city of Portland looked beautiful, even with the gentle haze of rain settling over it. It had an eerie quality to it—gentle and melancholy. We looked west, toward the river. That's when I saw the billboard.

"I climbed up there once," I said, pointing to the billboard in the distance.

I hadn't planned to say it, but we were sitting there, and I wasn't sure what else to say, so it just popped out. This is why I stay on the perimeter of parties like this. I wasn't trying to impress her, at least not consciously, but I think that somewhere deep inside of me my subconscious was saying, "Hey, I might not have friends with airplanes, and I might not look like a hair model after wakeboarding, but my life is exciting too."

“Really?” she asked. “For what?”

“A friend made me do it,” I said, and immediately regretted it, because it retracted any cool points I may have just earned. She looked at me expectantly.

“I mean, a friend and I climbed up there together,” I corrected myself. “You can see the whole city.”

She seemed interested.

“He and I looked out at the view and talked about life now and dreams we had for life someday,” I told her. She raised her eyebrows a little.

“It’s his job,” I clarified. “Besides, he’s not my type. He’s always jet-setting off to other countries to go on skiing trips or jump out of airplanes. Actually, come to think of it, you two would make a great couple,” I told her. “I should introduce you.”

The newlyweds were on stage now, starting their first dance together.

“What would you do with your life if you didn’t have to worry about money?” I said, after a minute. “That’s the question he asked me while we were sitting up there.”

“And?” Sharaya asked.

“It made me mad,” I said, laughing a little. “He was trying to inspire me, but instead it just made me angry.” I took another sip of wine.

“Why?”

“Because I was working a restaurant job at the time, trying to pay my way through graduate school. And not everyone has the luxury of living the way he lives. I don’t know where he gets all of his money.”

“Did you ever answer his question?” Sharaya asked.

“Yeah, I told him that if I really didn’t have to worry about paying my bills—which I *do* by the way, everyone does—I would

drive across the country and write a book about it.” I shrugged. “But normal people don’t get to just quit their lives and go on road trips.” I ran my hands across the royal blue velvet couch, watching the way it changed colors depending on the direction of the nap.

“Where would you go?” she asked.

“Everywhere. All fifty states.”

Outside, lights flashed, and we watched as the traffic stopped so the road could lift and a boat could pass under the Steel Bridge.

“You know, I’ve always wanted to travel across the country,” she said.

“Really? What would you do?”

“Play music.”

It didn’t surprise me. She had a beautiful voice. I thought so every time I heard her sing at church. I just didn’t know, until she told me, that she’d written a few songs of her own and was working to record her first album.

“It’s just an EP,” she said.

“Well, I don’t even know what that is,” I said. “So you’ve got me beat.”

Over the next few hours Sharaya convinced me to get up from my seat and get into the fray of the party. I had a good time, I’ll admit, watching the bride and groom shove cake into each other’s mouths and meeting all of Sharaya’s friends. She even got me to dance for a little bit.

But she wasn’t quite done prodding me out of my comfort zone. At the end of the evening, when I was finally fishing my keys out of my purse, she suddenly asked, “So when are we going to go on that road trip?”

It was midnight, and the couple had just left. We’d blown bubbles at them as they drove away, and I couldn’t believe I had stayed this late. I laughed a little and shook my head. I was proud

of myself for getting off the couch, but a road trip? That wasn't going to happen.

It was a nice thought, I told her, but not in the slightest bit realistic. It would cost too much, first of all—between food, lodging, gas, and then anything unexpected like the car breaking down or someone getting sick. You had to plan for things like that. Plus, we both had jobs and apartments, and I had a roommate who was counting on me to pay rent each month. Even if we were to move out of our apartments, or quit our jobs, what would we do with all of our stuff? After all, I had worked really hard to get my job. Hadn't she? Four years of undergraduate. Two-and-a-half of graduate school. Internships. School loans. Sweat and sleepless nights and tears. Finally, I had the job I had worked for. What was I going to do, just quit? What would my parents say? What would our friends think?

"I'm twenty-six," I told her. "I don't think it's wise to be planning cross-country road trips."

"Listen, Ally," she said, looking directly at me. "I've been writing more music lately and wanting to play more shows in our area. I think this would be a great way to motivate myself to do that. And sure, you have a good job. So do I. But is this really what you want to do with the rest of your life? Or do you want to write a book? If we went on a road trip, you could write while we traveled. You could even keep a blog, and by the end of it, I think you might have your book. We could sell CDs along the way. We'd make some money that way, and we could order T-shirts too, and collect tips at each of my shows."

It seemed she had a way out for every objection I could come up with.

"We could stay with people we know, Ally. Think about it. We would ask people to take us in for a night—just one night. That

wouldn't be that big of a deal, would it? And all the stuff that's in our apartments—I think if we sold all of that stuff, we could probably make enough money to cover us for a while. Let's get serious, do you really want a couch and a couple of dressers to keep you from what could be the best experience of your life?"

I didn't want to agree with her. I wanted to get mad and tell her she was ridiculous, but something about the sound of her voice and the sincerity of her offer made it impossible for me to do that. Her passion just made everything she was saying sound feasible and exciting. I didn't want to believe it was, but as I climbed in my car I heard myself tell her I would think about it. Not that I would go—but that it was open for discussion and that we would talk about it more tomorrow.

That's the thing with ideas. They start small, somewhere inside of you, and nothing will happen with them until you finally speak them out loud. We hold on to ideas for years sometimes, because we think they're meaningless, or impossible, or that people will laugh at us when we tell them. Or, maybe we hold on to them because we forget we even had them in the first place. But then, if we're lucky, we have a temporary blip in judgment—brought about by the whimsy of a wedding or an extra glass of wine—and we just let the words come tumbling out.