

the Neurosis of Coming Home

BY ERIN DECOU

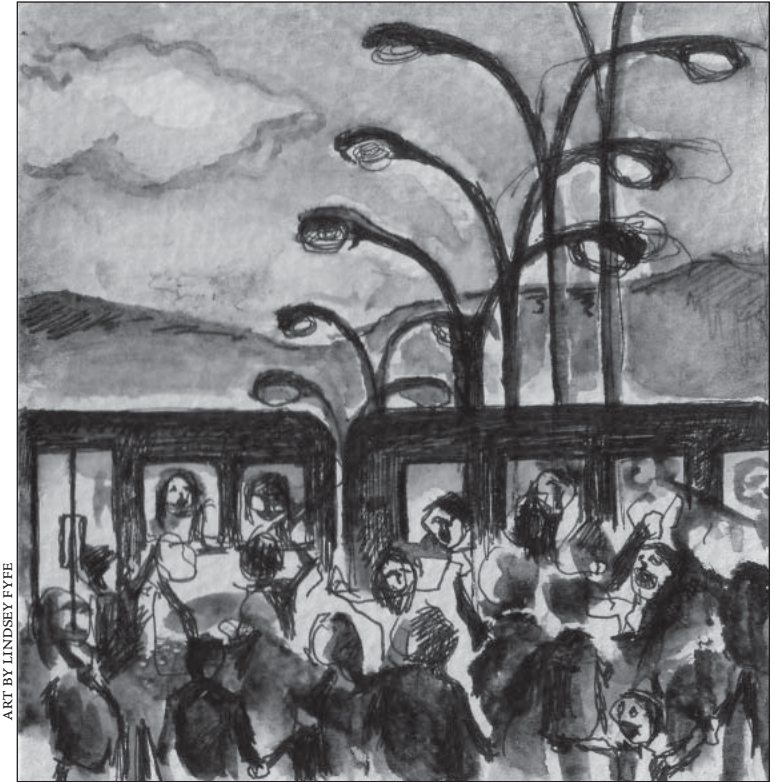
Everyone told me it would happen, and I expected it. But it took the bus system of Cape Cod to really bring the culture shock home. After a leisurely ferry ride over from the Vineyard, I found out that my ride from the ferry drop-off was no longer coming. So I decided to brave the US public transportation system to get to my intended destination, a mere hour and a half away by car from where I stood. I had walked across the border to Nepal. I had camped throughout Tibet. I had deciphered the time-tables of India and spent two unexpected days bumming around Bangkok alone. I had spent the last five months living in South Asia. I figured I could handle the buses of Cape Cod.

Or should I say the trolleys of Cape Cod, for public transportation on the Cape is more treat than

necessity, a tourist attraction almost. In many cases it costs more than the gas it takes to drive to the same place. I was elated to be back on my own, traveling around without a car, without a plan, just like in Asia. Only it was on the Cape, and the trolley dropped me off in front of the local Wal-Mart. My morals started grumbling, my mind raced to make a list of reasons why America sucks more than India.

The people are fat, I started. The kids are bratty, I continued. The buses drop you off in front of Wal-Mart, I added, leaving the list open. By the time I boarded my next ride, this time a cushy shuttle bus (with seat-belts!), my list was longer than I can remember.

Not that riding public transportation is a piece of cake in India either, but at least the buses don't drop you off in front of Wal-Mart.



ART BY LINDSEY FYFE

In trying to get to the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, I ended up in the lowest class of the Maharashtra Express, traveling from Katmandu to the tiny Indian town of Bodh Gaya. The train was packed tighter than cows driving to the American slaughter-house, or, worse, chickens sitting layer upon layer with beaks, feathers, and claws sticking out of their cages here and there. Similarly, arms, heads, whole bodies even, stuck out of our Standard Passenger car, with as many people as could pos-

sibly fit and then some clinging to the hurtling engine.

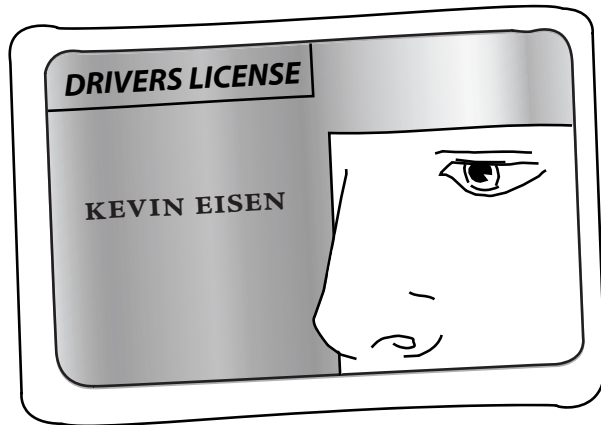
Somehow, luckily, a few roaming vendors managed to board the train and belt out their wares in their best frantic, high-pitched, and utterly incomprehensible Hindi. I managed to procure a delicious 12-rupee box of mango juice.

But none of these small comforts before the mad dash to actually board the train.

Although I would come to understand the frenzy of Indian crowds (particularly those deal-

For a Bouncer

BY



Some bouncer downtown just turned down my ID. My real ID with my picture on it. I'm from one of those crap states like Vermont and New Jersey with the IDs everyone else has. I got that license the summer I turned sixteen and I've waited five years to use it. Now some loser with a baseball cap and a GED tells me I can't.

This guy had a thick neck and those lips that stick out a little bit all the time, like the caricature of a fat baseball umpire. Whatever he looked like, he turned me down, asked to see something else. This never would have happened in Europe. I gave him my ATM card, and he told me to take a walk.

They let me in across the street,

but I didn't care. The crowd there was too old, and I walked in one side, straight past the bar, out the back door to the garden patio, and out the back gate. It was raining pretty hard, so the outside was empty.

I always do this. Wait until after to say what I should have said. I should have gone to the cops, that's what I should have done. I should have held up the line or something. Something.

I had to circle the block to get back to my car without passing in front of that goddamned bar again. But what the fuck ever. Things haven't been right since I got back—I spent five months of my last school year overseas—and it's probably

its tiny wrist. I wonder what it's for. The tiny unhappy thing. I am glad that some young man saved her a seat by sticking his hand through the window.

Bodh Gaya. We arrived after that ridiculous train ride and then another bus and a night spent sweating in a dingy guest house room with cement walls and a barred window. A fan was perpetually on but succeeded only in blowing hot air around and around and around. The bathroom for some reason has a heat lamp for a light and no windows. But at least we have a bathroom. Mary and I walk in and drop our packs, eat some dinner and drink some Cokes, replenishing our weariness with sugar and caffeine. Still, we walk back to our room minutes later and strip, content to spend the evening in our underwear under the fan, with maybe a handkerchief dipped in water and oozing over our foreheads. Maybe we'll peel back the skin of a mango later and dive in, cooling our faces as much as our appetites.

We wake early to avoid the heat and explore. This is Bihar, the poorest state in India, the one everyone has warned us about, but we see no small children rushing up to steal our wallets. We do see beggars, and pushy men peddling post cards, shoe-shines, prayer beads.

We push past to the temple we have traveled two days to see. A hulking mass, a mound like mud molded into a point, a figure carved in every crevice, the ancient structure rises up among trees and walkways and monks, and there is scaffolding around it but the burnished copper stands there silent and heavy even so. Golden light pours out around the Buddha seated inside, one hand in his lap, the other ever so slightly touching the ground.

The temple pulls us around and so we follow the path. I stop to take a photo of an old man leaning forward in prayer and then I round the bend and there it is—just a tree, fenced in but bending over, reaching out far across the outer wall and shading all of us. The Bodhi tree, and there as I walk to the descriptive plaque I know for sure it's the tree of trees, and there behind it is a throne, empty for some 2500 years but still possessing that ancient and forever essence of Gautama Buddha himself.

There are tourists from Gujarat and monks from Thailand and everyone converges ever so silently in the presence of this profound piece of nature. Soon after the Buddha gained enlightenment here someone took a chute from that very tree and planted it in Thailand, where the original Buddhism still flourishes. When that first tree in Bodh Gaya fell away, someone else

only because of my poor grammar. I also never spoke to any official water people to hear the counterpoint tale.

That night Ty and I slept in bunk beds in his private room. He had the top bunk and his own mosquito net from California. I was on the bottom and completely vulnerable to the elements. The place reeked of rotting wood and bug spray, and periodically something nipped me under my clothes.

“Ah! Fucking fuckhead mother-fucking bugs!”

“Makes you miss Quito, doesn’t it?”

“Hell no.”

I could hear Ty fondling the crucifix around his neck. He was a fairly devout Episcopalian which must be one of the lenient denominations. Not that I know religion. We had had several simplified theological discussions that frustrated the hell out of him. It turned his mind inside out to fathom my agnosticism.

“How can you live everyday without believing in an afterlife?”

“Umm...I don’t know. I guess I don’t want to get my hopes up.”

“So you didn’t adopt any religious ideals at all from your upbringing?”

“Eh, we got presents at Chanukah. Besides, Jews don’t have an afterlife.”

“WHAT?!”

He gave up on his half-hearted mission to convert me but found me open-minded enough to hear about his God, his Universal Truths, and other peoples Gods and Truths.

“I hate the Catholicism here,” he was beginning a tangent from the bunk, “I guess it gives the kids discipline, but it’s so fucking loveless. They recite the same prayers everyday, sit in a ridiculously adorned church without shoes on their goddamn feet, praying to God that when they’re kicked out of the orphanage at 14 that they won’t starve or get killed or prostituted.

“Meanwhile, this is a space to feel genuine love. But the nuns won’t even let me hug the kids! Why? Because they’ll get ‘too accustomed to it’ and won’t be able to handle leaving. I think that’s bullshit.

“Not to mention I can’t tell a goddamn soul here that I’m gay. The Italian guy, the dog-killer, is starting to suspect something. I mean am I that obvious? What is it? Is it my bleach blond hair? My rhinestone belt? My over-annunciated S’s?”

Despite all our differences, I loved that kid’s irony. And I couldn’t wait to hear it everywhere again.

“I’m leaving in two days,” I said suddenly.

“No! You shouldn’t go back to Quito! Just stay here!”

thousands of years ago I sit on a ledge of the fence across from the tree, fold my legs, place my hands together with thumb-tips touching and ever so lightly close my eyes.

The tree, magnificent and reaching, catches the shining sun and casts a green glow on everything underneath. Despite the shade, early summer in the center of India surrounds me, making me sweat. As I sit there meditating, peaceful, salty drops roll down my cheeks. Through my slitted eyes I see small Indian feet pointing toward me, though my meditation attempts to drown them out. I hear young voices exclaiming and laughing in Hindi. And though I continue my meditation in this holiest of places, I know a group of Indian tourists are giggling at that moment at the Westerner in a tank-top meditating under the bodhi tree.

That moment is long and lasting, and extends many months to this present one, where I find myself staring not at fallen Bodhi leaves and small sandaled feet, but at the polished floor of a monastery in New York.

Here, I am waiting for the wind to blow through the room and take

my mind with it. I am sitting in half lotus position with my thumbs locked and my back straight trying to ignore the growing ache in my shoulders and the golden artwork around me. This is my life after living abroad. Buddhist meditation retreats, blaring Tibetan pop and an unrelenting scrutiny of where I am and, more importantly, where I’ve been.

These are the things that pop into my head at unknown intervals, like flashbacks in their poignancy, taking me entirely out of the present and flung into that stinking sweaty mass of moments from the best time in my life. I try not to think of them, especially while sitting in my beginner’s half-lotus. I focus on my breath, seeing the light air flow into my body and out again. One. My gaze hovers an inch above the glossy waxed floor and my hands rest in light meditative fists on my crossed knees. Two. I feel the air refresh my senses, see the floor swimming in its colors, let the breath out. The wind blows in through open windows, goes out the other side. I am still waiting for it to carry my mind along with it, and it will, but only back to the winds of India.

“SHH SHH SHH!”

The dogs began a collective effort to tear down the partition. The hinge was loosening. I leaped back into the middle of the empty unlit road which excited them even more. “HOLA, ALGUIEN ESTA?! POR FAVOR VENGAN!”

Before my echoes reached the orphanage, one shepherd was loose and running toward me at full speed. I stayed stone still.

“Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck!”

I was never one for battle instinct. I just got used to the fact that I’d be dead quite soon, and that my last words would be cowardly imprecations.

But before the dog reached me, he fell. And before he fell, there was a gunshot. The dogs that stayed behind to cheer on their friend were silenced. The night was quiet again and the orphanage lights turned off. The sun was starting to come out.

I let my heart beat again. I was vaguely disappointed that I was still alive since I had so thoroughly prepared myself for the end of perception. The dog was still breathing on the ground and I wondered if anyone would take the time to save it.

“Chica!” said a voice from close behind me, “Are you a friend of the gringo?”

I turned around and noticed that I was standing in front of another open gate, and a particularly

tall European-looking man was standing just behind it. If he was carrying a gun he was hiding it well.

Very embarrassed about my movie-like entrance I apologized like hell at first, “I am sorry! I apologize! I have such shame! Thank you! Thank you! Me salvaste!”

He silenced me politely with his hand, “It’s not important. I hate those fucking dogs.” He summoned me. “Come, that’s the girls’ side over there. The boys stay over here. Tyler is waking up now to meet you.”

I wondered what jokes Ty would make about the distinct gender divisions. I wondered what jokes I would make about my sudden appreciation of Ecuador’s lack of gun control. Within two hours the German shepherd was gone and I never asked what happened to it.

It’s a narcissistic habit to look through my adolescent journals, but I can’t help myself. Who was that creature who hated herself so much?

She was a girl with time on her hands. It wasn’t the wealth itself that made her harm her body on purpose. It wasn’t the reliable college funds that wrote her hypothetical suicide note drafts, obsessed about weight, and loved nothing but the family canine. It was all those drawling hours spent with nothing else to do but think. Think about her own

pick it up if you didn’t have to?”

The last time I was in Paris, I thought the mixture of freshly baked bread and dog ‘merdre’ was somehow fragrant in this city of love. Funny how romantic ideals are only emphatic when there isn’t any romance. Now it just smelled awful.

“This is it, I see the street name, Rue de Montparnasse.”

“The Comfort Inn – Sacre Coeur?”

“No, the one . . . next to it.” I pointed to a pale pink townhouse with ornate, rusted iron fixtures around each window. I thought it was gorgeous.

“Maybe we could stay in the Comfort Inn?” R said, putting down my overpacked suitcase.

“No, no, no, this is the point. We’re gonna be starving artists in Montmartre, we’re going somewhere where they barely understand us. We’re going somewhere with no TV. That’s the point. It’s Paris.”

The truth was, R couldn’t afford to stay anywhere else, so I’d created the image of romantic Parisians living in poverty to passively force him into a realistic budget.

I used my sad version of *Franglais* to convince the owner of the building to give us a room. A 5th story walk-up sans bathroom. The shower cost 2 euros, and was on the first floor. I thought it was hilarious – we opened the windows and let the February breeze come in the room,

collapsing on the squeaky bed.

The next day we planned on faithfully adhering to the guidebook’s list of Parisian activities: the Eiffel Tower, the Sacre Couer, the Luxembourg Gardens and the Ile de France. But we decided to eat brunch first in one of the outdoor heated cafés near our hotel.

As soon as R realized the 7-euro meal contained only a few baguettes, a croissant and bitter, black coffee, he started pouting.

“I can’t believe they don’t even give you eggs,” he complained.

“Well, we’re not in New Jersey. It’s not like we’re at Perkins. Do you really want to feel like you’re at Perkins in Paris?”

“I just want eggs.” He crossed his arms.

I tried poking him in the face with my baguette. I thought this might elicit a smile. Instead, he swatted it away like a fly, sending it clear across the café floor. I looked at where it had landed, next to the foot of an elderly French man, enjoying a smoke with his croissant. A small bulldog with sad, watery black eyes sat loyally by the man’s feet. It looked at me curiously before nibbling delicately at the baguette. I gave up.

“Ok, that’s great. So here are the keys, and here’s the map. I’m going to see the Gardens.” I rose from my chair.

“You’re not seriously leaving me

to look around for marijuana. Ty was leaving Quito the following morning to work at a Catholic orphanage somewhere about the coast. He adored the hell out of kids, but he knew the kids would have trouble adoring him back. Ty is gay. The weekend prior he was forcefully dragged to mocking crotches in the discoteca because he danced like he talked, and Ty and I made out to save him from some miserable beatings that night, and to save myself from the horny jaws of machismo.

We got all subsequent rants out of our systems the following day and it was back to joking as usual.

“Ah, nothing like a lungful of exhaust in the morning!”

But a harrowing feeling remained that Quito had more power over our sarcastic souls than we realized. A lot of the people we called shrumpy would rob, rape, and hit us with their tiny speeding Fiats in a minute. And anyway, it was us who looked like asses for being so pale, so light haired, and for speaking oh so functional Spanish all the time.

“What do you study?”

“Anthropology,” I respond, “But I enjoy the journalism.”

I’m not a fan of kids so I interned at a newspaper during the day, following reporters and occasionally understanding what was going on. At night I moved from host families to \$6 hostels to kind people who pitied me. It was easy to find safe ac-

commodations because everyone always thought I was in grave danger. They wondered why I wasn’t staying at the Hilton in the Amazonas district with the rest of the gringos.

I couldn’t possibly explain that I’m a masochist. I couldn’t even explain being vegetarian.

But beside all that, every small pretty American girl needs to put her life at risk once in awhile. It distracts us from the surplus mental fat we deem as suffering. I’ve even stopped whining.

The neighbors in my New Jersey cul-de-sac love to talk. And ever since we moved here my mother started talking too.

“I swear that dad and I are moving, if not for the leaf blowers wailing twenty four fucking hours a day then for Pam’s horrendous new vinyl siding.”

To be fair, the leaf blowers never do stop wailing, and the vinyl siding is horrendous.

“Jersey suburbs are New York City’s artificial consumptive neighbors. Prosthetic obese appendages,” I wrote in my journal that night.

It was fun to play fill-in-the-concept-with-words in the English version, nuances and all. But they were really just words. In truth I couldn’t have been happier to be home to America’s amenities. Hot showers. Double ply toilet paper. Bagels. Abortions.

with houseboats. I saw a man in a dusty grey jacket smiling at me and I reached for R’s hand. But I couldn’t find him. He’d disappeared. All I saw were the broken neon lights outside the sex shows, horrifying in their unapologetic neglect for love and emotion. The city had abandoned hope for normalcy, and rejected me, with my searching and my aspirations, as a member. Everyone around me was sad and huddled in darkness, the red lights setting their faces ablaze with grief.

I ran to one of the houseboats, only to bump into the smiling man in grey. He smelled like chocolate, and I realized it was R. I hadn’t moved at all; the city itself had collapsed before my eyes while I stood motionless.

In the morning, I sat with R in a corner shop near the flower market while he puffed away—I neglected another go and read my guidebook cover to cover.

Our last trip came from a book we’d once seen around Christmas in New Jersey. A white church in Mykonos on the Greek Islands sat on its cover, overlooking the turquoise water of the Aegean. We’d sat on the floor of Barnes & Noble, bundled in our winter coats, turning every page.

Our hotel owner picked us up at the airport in an off-white van that smelled like fish. He seemed to enjoy testing out his English on us.

His name was Antonios.

“You’ve been before to Greece?”

“No, first time. It’s gorgeous.” The tiny main roads turned into even tinier white cobblestoned streets surrounded by clusters of eerily perfect block houses. I spotted a Starbucks.

“Oh you see? Yes, only a couple of months now. Not so popular. Not good coffee, I think.”

For the first time in our six-month long trip, R’s face was truly frozen in disbelief. We’d arrived at sunset, and as we crested the island’s central hill we had a clear view of the town circling the central port. R’s eyes were shining, reflecting the white of the city, and I wondered how hard I was willing to try to make his eyes light up like that.

Antonios’ Guesthouse was a group of dusty rooms, all with views of the sea. As usual, we dropped our bags without unpacking and headed down the hill. There were cats everywhere, in every sunlit alley and on every flower-filled balcony. The gypsies poked their heads out from child-sized blue doors.

“I want to live here. I want to have a house here, and spend every summer here.” R kept trying to bottle the feeling, the beauty of it. I recognized the sentiment, the struggle to articulate something, and the frustration in knowing it would never leave the tip of your tongue.

We were there for three cloud-

Harpo



BY HALLEY BONDY

My mother has been pissed at me since the moment I returned from Ecuador. She's getting more pissed because I'm pretending not to notice.

To make a long story short, my buddies live at least 1 hour away. I was gone for 1 month and 3 days, and will be gone again in 4 weeks for 1 semester. I am 20 years old. In America, it would be considered normal that I am never home.

My mother however has deemed me selfish, probably rightfully so, because throughout my antics I neglected to love the family dog Harpo. It's not enough that I drop by, feed her, and manage her droppings. And I do it so reluctantly too. I admit the few non-obligatory en-

counters I've had with Harpo since my return involved shoving her violently off my bed, kicking her in the face for begging, and shouting that if she doesn't get the fuck out of my way I'll slice off one of her erect ears.

My mother wonders, and now I wonder. What has happened to me that I'm not drawn to that fluffy and spirited terrier anymore? What did that nation do to me that I've lost the passion to spoil her? Where did I get the heart to resist that wittle face?

She would not be eaten, sacrificed, or made to pull cannery carts in Ecuador or anything like that. She'd probably just be mangy, cancer-ridden, and ignored. In Ecuador

the Only Move I Could Have Made

BY LIBBY LEONARD

Horrendous and absurd living situations beleaguered me throughout most of my college life. I cohabited with seven guys in a Fight Club-esque dilapidated hovel, where the living room smelled like bad quiche and the filthy toilets contained enough bacteria to launch another plague. I lived with two Chinese grad students, who left rotting fish carcasses and thawing eel strips on the counter on a daily basis. And while I greet recollections of these situations with a smile and an aneurysm, nothing is as unbearable and soul sucking as living with my parents post four years of college.

Three years ago, many of my graduating friends went on to some sort of job that kept them from moving home. Except my buddy Jake, now 27 years old, still living with his parents. Sitcoms have taught me that older people living at home should be treated like socially stilted,

mutant freaks, and while I used to ridicule him unrelentingly over the phone every time we spoke, I have recently joined his subculture of post-graduate hell.

My reasons are different from his. I have no money and want to save up, so I can become a broke artistic cliché in New York City. He, on the other hand, has never paid a rent bill in his life and is thus afraid of having to live where some of his money might actually go towards living expenses rather than payments on his new mustang or <insert chic new in-flight magazine gadget here>.

While I'm dodging a real job and he's dodging the real world, there are people going home in increasing numbers with each passing graduation date. Is it the economy or is it just that our generation is full of slothful, ambitionless children afraid to grow up? Going by society's standards, we are probably the latter.

issue two:

the Prodigal Son's Return

It's a very old story, the story of the prodigal son. It comes from the Bible. It goes like this.

A son tires of his home, gets his share of the inheritance from his father early. He skips town and lives big for a few years, but the money runs out, and he comes back on his knees.

In the story, the father opens his arms to his lost-cum-found son. He puts clothes on his body and slippers on his feet. He puts rings on his son's fingers and slaughters the fatted calf. His father prepares a feast and welcomes him home. It's just like old times.

In the story, nothing changes. Home and the son

and the father—everyone and thing are just as they were, never mind their years apart. Everyone except the fatted calf, of course.

But the story doesn't say why he left. The story doesn't really say what happened while he was there, and the story doesn't say what changed while he was gone. The story isn't much of a story.

In this issue, five writers deal with what it is to come home, why it is they went away, and what changed while they were out.

apply to love, to jobs, to any minute aspect of life. When people say that this generation is an aimless cluster of idiots who refuse to grow up, it's because we've been taught to equate growing up with settling down, something many college graduates just aren't ready for.

There is a whole website devoted to this new mental catastrophe: www.quarterlifecrisis.com. When I first heard about it I scoffed, thinking it was for people who wanted some sort of neurosis to make them more interesting. I figured hopping from job to job in search of the right one was something called "not settling for mediocrity."

I clicked on the member forums. There were post headings like

"What's it take to be happy?"

"Am I living to fail or failing to live?" and

"Do I need happy drugs?"

I laughed at these people. It seemed like some pathetic belligerent offshoot of an AA meeting. Some idiot started a new religion and now people were flocking to pray.

Then I started my new temp job. I sat in front of a computer for 8 hours a day typing in payroll figures for electricians and janitors. "What does it take to be happy?" I wondered. "Am I living to fail or failing to live?"

Subsequently I decided that all the happy pills in the world wouldn't keep me from throwing this com-

puter through my cubicle every time I thought how I'd spent sixty-grand to live at home with my parents and work a 9-5 job that primates could handle.

Mostly, I was worried that this was a job I could be stuck doing for the rest of my life—something that I would never let happen, but a scary prospect nonetheless. Then I remembered a masseuse I met the other day. Her name was Amy.

After some light conversation about the weather, I asked her how long she had been doing massage. She was older, and since my parent's lifestyles both dictated that once you had a job, you kept it forever, I was surprised when she said only five years. She'd spent the twenty years before that in accounting.

"It's different waking up to something you enjoy," she said. Thus, she made my entire day.

While the mere thought of doing something I didn't like for twenty years made me a little nauseous, it was nice to know an adult had proven that you don't have to be stuck in a job you don't want. Ever.

She also was the first adult I encountered in my area that didn't give me that sarcastic "your degree got you real far, I'll have fries with that by the way" kind of look when I told her that I'd moved home with my Dad. It's kind of stressful, but I know it's the only move I could have made.

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