

City of Dreams

On leaving the place that changed my life.



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is at work on a memoir titled
The Wild Oats Project.

In a few weeks, I will put what relatively few possessions I have into storage, get behind the wheel of my aging Volkswagen convertible, and drive down I-5 to Los Angeles. It'll be a straight shot on 378 miles of asphalt nearly all the way. I'll get off at the Glendale Boulevard exit and pull up to the furnished Spanish-style cottage—with a driveway, front yard and backyard, and lots of working space—my boyfriend and I have rented in Atwater Village.

There, I'll attempt to write a book about what happened to me in San Francisco. I came to SF nine years ago in a 23-foot Winnebago, which my then-husband drove from Philadelphia on I-70 through the middle of the continent: Indianapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City, Denver, central Utah. We parked it on a Pacifica cliff overlooking the ocean while we hunted for an apartment. I was still in my 30s, married three years, and hopeful. I had first seen the city when I was 20, knowing immediately and without a doubt that I belonged in it. It took a long time to get here, but upon arrival, I could feel the marine air and crystalline light envelop me like a vaporous shield, encasing my happiness and warding off the anxieties and melancholy of my youth.

Nothing bad can happen to me here, I thought wondrously. I remember declaring, "This is it. I'm going to be buried in Colma."

Within two years, I'd snatched the job of my dreams, made several fascinating friends, began having more fun than I'd had since I was a kid, and bought my first house—a lovely little Georgian in the Castro, where dinner parties regularly morphed into late-night dance-offs. I began to open up not just socially but sexually, no doubt

due to age but also due to the city's open-minded sense of experimentation. Tantra workshops, orgasmic meditation, erotic dance classes, and feminine-empowerment circles beckoned. My iPhone blinked continually with invites to galas and boat outings and dive bars, its address book filling with the names of acquaintances who, like me, sought to expand their boundaries. Like everyone we knew, my husband and I lived from one travel outing to the next, always on our way to or back from Tahoe, Napa, Mendocino, Mexico, Hawaii, New York, Europe. In the midst of all this, I reached for the one thing I didn't yet have—a

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child, partly out of a natural biological urge, partly out of a desperate, if semiconscious, sense that I needed something irrevocable to anchor me amid all the colorful, entrancing motion at the surface.

There was no child. But there was plenty of everything else.

When I pull onto I-5, I'll be leaving behind a house that's half mine, an ex-husband who will always be family, a half-dozen friends I hope to keep, and a dozen more I've regretfully let fall by the wayside during the solitude and grieving that accompany divorce. San Francisco's sheen has worn off, or more precisely, mine has. Its shimmering beauty and limitless potential didn't protect me from anything, least of all myself. Quite the opposite. It ripped the lid off my life and said, "Look. You can have anything you want." Transfixed, I hearkened to its siren call but ignored—or perhaps it neglected to speak—the second part: "You can have anything you want, but it won't be free." San Francisco may be the most magical city on Earth, but it's still on Earth, after all.

As I head down I-5, I'll be looking forward

to a few things I've been missing this whole time. I want more sunlight and weather that remains consistent throughout the day, so I don't have to make the psychological leap from fog to sun and back every 12 hours. I visualize flat roads that make biking easy and an ocean in which I can occasionally swim. I imagine new restaurants, warm outdoor dining, a touch of grittiness, and neighbors of all ages, not just those between 25 and 45.

On the other hand, I'll miss the manageable, almost cozy size of San Francisco, the immutable presence of water in the very air, the views from every last hill, the two mythic bridges linking it to the real, mundane world, and the friends who've made the past nine years the most memorable of my life. The only thing I won't miss is Silicon Valley and the techy progeny it launched into SF proper. I feel gleeful at the thought of escaping its ever-growing domination, its adolescent solipsism, its absurd billboards advertising cloud storage. I cling to a faint, naive hope that the farther I get from it, the greater my chances are of living a life more immersed in the physical than the virtual plane. I realize the irony there, of course. The place I'm escaping to is the original world capital of virtual reality—just an older, celluloid form that pre-dates YouTube and Facebook.

When I signed a lease and realized I was actually leaving San Francisco, I stopped sleeping. For several nights over several weeks, I'd lie awake until dawn, angst-ridden, praying, damning, wondering what on Earth my future held. At a Giants game, while standing in line for garlic fries, panic crept up my spine, sending me to the restroom in sobs. For the truth is, I'm horrible at change. I'm no adventurer. This whole time, it was San Francisco that was the adventurer. It opened its wide, wild cloak, and I stepped in and let it sweep me up.

When I emerged from the restroom, it was the seventh-inning stretch. The crowd was standing and swaying along to Journey's "When the Lights Go Down in the City." I looked out over the bay and up at the circling seagulls. Every sight I laid eyes on—the kayakers waiting for a homer, the giant Coke slide, the sliver of Bay Bridge off to my left—took at me. Helpless, I whispered to myself, "Don't worry. It's not going anywhere."

That's the kind of city it is. The kind that breaks your heart. The kind that's hard to leave. X

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