

EXIT 109

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June 25, 2010

I will never forget the day I left New Jersey. I was a human sinkhole, an unstable torrent of emotion, acting out the moment as if it were simply a figment of my imagination, a dream. Unfortunately, it was no dream. It was a nightmare. I was moving to Ohio.

Leaving my parents and the home I grew up in was, for that moment, more than I could bear. They made it so easy for me – no tears, no regrets – just best wishes for a safe journey and a promise to see me soon. I wouldn't have expected anything else. Their performance that day was worthy of an Oscar nomination, smiling proudly as they watched their only daughter and two granddaughters leave for parts unknown, for that land-locked state called Ohio. What was I thinking? Clearly this was the dumbest decision I had ever made.

To really understand my dilemma, one needs to walk in my shoes. Let's digress a little and attempt to simulate that stroll. I was conceived in Martha's Vineyard (which explains my affection for wine) and born in New York City at Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital. (Fifth Avenue *and* an only child ... if that isn't a recipe for spoiled rotten.) We moved to New Jersey when I was two and I quickly adapted to life in the sticks: that's city slang for the suburbs. Not quite used to our surroundings, we would spend weekends in The City where summertime found me in a makeshift pool (the fire department would flood the basketball courts) – or in a sandbox overlooking the Hudson River – or hanging out the window watching the traffic go by – or grabbing a slice of pizza through the sidewalk window, a hot dog from the Sabrett cart or a cookie from the corner bakery. Oh, the sights, sounds and smells of Manhattan. Once, when I was six, I got to stay for a week by myself with my Aunt Madeline and Uncle Rene. They weren't really relatives, but they could have been. They took me to the World's Fair and we made a green plastic dinosaur from one of those injection mold machines. I ended up going home early. It wasn't because I was homesick. It was because my father missed me.

The more time we spent in New Jersey, the more the eventuality of a final transition became real. The house at Hill Road was becoming a home, one in which I would continue to live in – from time-to-time – over the next 40 years. I was deliriously happy, enjoying the delights of beach, boardwalk, boys, bars, city life, ethnicity, diversity, cuisine and culture. The adventures were numerous; the stories are legendary; the memories will last a lifetime.

Ohio seemed like a lifetime away. Driving south on the Garden State Parkway, the familiar green signs faded along with the exit numbers that are so symbolic to all Jersey natives (You're from New Jersey? What exit?). Seven hours to go. I should have been concentrating solely on driving but the heaviness in my chest wouldn't allow it. My psyche was in constant motion, one moment fixed, the next, in total denial. I tried to trick myself into believing this was just another road trip, but it was to no avail: a lame attempt.

The seven hours passed quickly, of course, because I was in no hurry to arrive. The mountainous landscape gave way to flat land and it was at that moment I saw it – the Welcome to Ohio sign. It looked so happy in an American pie kind of way, with that wavy red, white and blue lettering. It reminded me of a scary, painted clown, laughing me aboard. Terror struck as I thought about the hand I was dealt and played. I had just traded The Garden State for The Buckeye State, the Atlantic Ocean for Lake Erie, Brooklyn for Briar Hill, and a Lexus for a Ford. My poker skills were obviously questionable. I took a deep breath and released a big sigh. The Jersey Girl had arrived.

Change is difficult under the best of times. Try tackling this during the worst of times: relocating the family to Ohio, relocating daughter #1 to Chicago for freshman year, orientating daughter #2 to Canfield High School as a Junior and beginning a new job all at the same time. I was trying to be optimistic; however, the tasks at hand were daunting and overwhelming. I often

found myself home alone because of travel and school schedules. There were no weekend invitations to friends' houses. There was nothing to do and no one around. The company that I relocated to Ohio for, closed operations, and I lost my job after only one year. I was angry, resentful, hurt. I continued to develop discontent for everything around me. I was quick to judge and very, very unhappy. It was not a good place to be.

There was a Florida room in the house we bought and I quickly turned it into my New Jersey room, filled with my favorite things: photographs, seashells, sea glass, cottage furniture. Reminiscent of feeling trapped and going for a long walk on the beach as therapy, the New Jersey room offered me similar comfort. I created new patterns of behavior, ones that had structure and meaning; ones I could draw strength from. Little by little, I was relinquishing my inner battle.

Leaving Canfield for Poland was victorious. After two years of torture, I finally felt comfortable, at home. It might have had something to do with the apple pie that a neighbor brought over to welcome me. Remember, I was used to finding kindness and humor in the Walt Kowalski's of the world. Pinch me. This was like living in Mayberry.

By this time, I had basically deconstructed my "Jersey", but only to a point. You can take the girl out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the girl. I decided to embrace the positive and allow my social differences to shine light as opposed to forcing a shadow. For the first time in a long while, I was actually enjoying my newfound environment and myself.

All was good with the world until June of 2006. We were very excited preparing for high school graduation. Another stressful weekend approached as the variables of family dynamics came together: my oldest daughter was returning home from Chicago, my parents and ex-husband were arriving from New Jersey, and my boyfriend of ten years was arriving with his

daughter who was to begin a four-week summer vacation with us. No pressure there. I had everything planned and set with the exception of one thing – Dad’s unexpected surgery.

Dad’s surgery was scheduled for the graduation morning. Mom and I were by his side and waited until he went to recovery before we left for the ceremony. The operation had been a success. The next four weeks of intensive care were not so successful. Little fires would erupt and needed to be put out. We were at a loss for medical records and were in constant communication with doctors in New Jersey. We were only allowed to visit for one hour at a time, every three hours. We were drained and so was he. He left us on June 30.

Since that time, Mom has moved in next door and the daughters have graduated college. As for me, I have gotten married, grown some roots and am pursuing a Bachelor’s Degree at Youngstown State University. Life goes on.

Life does go on, but it is distinctly different. I am not deliriously happy. I am not thoroughly enjoying the delights of Youngstown. Despite this air of displeasure, I am learning to adapt, to adjust and to rethink life’s purpose. The extreme sadness I felt in the beginning has softened to distant melancholy. I move on with a sense of unfinished business in the form of an unanswered question – what am I doing here?

I have been asking myself that question for a long time, six years to be exact. It’s a common question in the Mahoning Valley. Think about it. Why would *anyone* want to move here when most people aspire to move away? Youngstown, the land of opportunity lost, or maybe not.

When I lost my father, everyone told me there was a reason that he died *here*; there was a reason for me to *be here*. Mentally struggling with this notion, I have relentlessly searched for a

clue that would disclose *the reason*. I was desperate to open Pandora's box; to possess my hope for the future.

I think back to that earlier drive across the Pennsylvania Turnpike when I tried to trick myself into thinking I was taking "just another road trip." And while the uncertainty of the road ahead is paramount and the direction vague at best, I feel the pull of my father piloting me through these uncharted waters and, as scary as they are, I find consolation because I know he would never lead me astray.

The reason I am here is to accept a gift from the very ground I took exception to; to take advantage of a unique opportunity that offers treasures untold: a Bachelor's Degree from Youngstown State University. To think that the very place I once dreaded would become my gateway to chance and advancement. Logically, this seems an odd turn of events, but then "once in a while you get shown the light in the strangest of places if you look at it right" (Scarlet Begonias, Grateful Dead).

Looking back, I guess it's not about seeing things as they are; it's about seeing things as you are. All I ever needed was to look in the right direction and I can thank Mom and Dad for that. Some would say it's ridiculous to think that Youngstown would have a hand in helping a Jersey Girl come full circle. They just may need to make a *road trip*.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This paper has been interesting for me to write. It has caused me to relive the painful separation of leaving my childhood home and of facing my father's death. At the same time, it has brought a smile to my face and warmth to my heart as I recall my childhood, my parents, my relationships and my children ... my journey thus far.

It has also caused me to self reflect, to take a good long look inside, to question, to think about what matters, what's important in life, of coming to terms with myself, with others.

I have cried real tears as I tell you my tale and I still feel that twinge of sadness in my heart, that longing for home. But, just like the amusements at New Jersey's Asbury and Ohio's Idora, life changes and the merry-go-round just isn't quite the same. The magic may be physically gone, but it will stay in my heart forever.