

## The Only One

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Fluvanna county: population 27,249. One courthouse, one high school, one stoplight. My family from the big city used to balk at our town. With cries of “What do you mean there’s no fast food here?” and “You’re telling me the nearest Walmart is 30 minutes away?”. I would only laugh at this. We didn’t even live in the rural part of Fluvanna. Sure, on my way to school I would look out the window for a glimpse of the cows that live on the side of the highway. And yes, I would savor the smell of the country, or as my cousins knew it, manure and dirt. But the country was all I ever knew and I was proud of it.

It’s the little places that some may see as ordinary that have special meanings in a small town. Take our town’s only strip mall. The sprawling parking lots and half-broken, dimly lit signs are a staple in suburban America, but ours is special. This was home to the Goodwill where my friends and I celebrated my 16th birthday. We bought old homecoming dresses and ran around in the Food Lion across the street. It’s also the home to the sushi restaurant where my girlfriend and I had our first date, followed by a very awkward hug in the parking lot. Or our park, Pleasant Grove, where my childish hands sticky with candy apple and kettle corn residue would hold on tightly to a mechanical bull during our town’s ‘Old Farm Day’. Where many years later, the same girlfriend almost got us arrested for trespassing after she claimed she couldn’t read the “DO NOT ENTER” signs. They let us go, though, I have a feeling it might have something to do with my mom’s friendship with our sheriff. Fluvanna’s homey in that way.

However, as soon as the hot, sticky summer air bleed to a crisp fall breeze, the small town comfort began to wrap its familiar hands around my neck and squeeze. Friends began to stack an ungodly amount of dorm supplies in their living rooms and plan their final goodbyes. Time's tidal wave quickly swept me off my feet, just like the river that runs through our town. The selfish part of me wanted to dig my heels in the sand, dam up the river, and stop the ebb and flow of growing up. So when familiar faces at work started commenting: "PVCC is a great starting point." or "Oh well, there's nothing wrong with community college. Four-year college isn't for everyone,," I wanted to tell them, 'I never asked for your opinion. Of course, there's nothing wrong with my choice. You're the only one implying that there is,'. But instead, I'd plaster on my customer service smile and tell them to "Have a great day!"

The park where I had all of my birthday parties did not feel special anymore. It was just a park where the county's fair was held. No mechanical bull, no more 'Old Farm Day' celebrations where we would see who could guess the weight of the county's biggest cow, just a couple of rigged carnival games. The strip mall that I used to love now is home to a couple of old buildings and bittersweet memories. I was confronted by the fact that my home was just another small town just off of a busy interstate where no one stopped in. The reason I loved this place was because of the people who had already left for bigger, brighter things. There's nothing more isolating than knowing that the people you love are out having new experiences, meeting new people and you're stuck with the same old town.

Slowly but surely I'm crawling my way back to the surface, determined not to let the waves of time sweep me away. Sometimes loneliness still sinks its ugly claws into my chest, reminding me that things will never be the same. When that happens I like to reflect on all the good memories I have and remind myself that although the core people of my adolescence may

be in other parts of the country, I still have a connection to them no one can take away. I will make new memories while cherishing the ones I already have. No matter what, this place will always be my home.