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You Can Take the Girl Out of St. Louis ...

By [Julia Smillie](#) and Stefene Russell

Julia on St. Louis:

I want you to know one thing first of all: I did what I was supposed to. I did the best I could. I gave what I had and, yes, I probably took even more—but don't we all? I don't think I left a moment too soon. I tried it all, from the chicken wings and toasted ravioli, to Ted Drewes long after the weather said "no," to interminably long innings at Busch Stadium. (For the record, and for those who forced me along, I didn't fail to understand the sport; I simply failed to understand *why it was interesting*.) I ate my way through the CWE, the Loop, even Webster and Maplewood. I went to the history museum—more than once, even. (I *think* it was the history museum.) Sometimes I even went inside. I pushed my way through the Science Center on more than one uncomfortably packed weekend afternoon, dragging a borrowed child in tow, rushing past exhibits I didn't understand a bit.

I WORKED AT IMO'S, FOR GOD'S SAKE.

I did St. Louis—a fact you'll have trouble arguing. I lived in St. Louis a dozen years, just a neat enough package of time to consider closing the lid and giving it a go in another city. I had the sense that I had run my course, at least for the time being and even if I wasn't tiring exactly of the city, it was tiring of me and suggesting I should go out and find myself. Or at least find myself living in another city.

And it's been nine months since this Jake Barnes fled. Just...enough...time. Now, I can look back at St. Louis, and I can only find one word to describe what I had within the city's confines: ownership. I owned St. Louis. Not in a key to the city sort of way. And not in the sense of knocking on doors and collecting rent. Seriously, I would hardly have had the time for that. I suspect that I might still own part of it, but you'd have to look hard for the paperwork. (I know there's a library downtown somewhere, just couldn't tell you where)

I own St. Louis in the same way that a certain amount of experience in any given space—geographic or within time—gives you a sense of entitlement. And what was I entitled to? "A disaster," one might think, considering I rushed to St. Louis sight unseen at the age of 17, clutching a scholarship from Webster University. You can call it divine intervention, or narrow choice. But I just wasn't going to live at home and go to college—even if it meant four years of theater

majors belting show tunes in the halls. I didn't know that I was going to stay in St. Louis longer than I had stayed in any other city my entire life. And I wouldn't have if the show tunes hadn't ceased after four years...

In St. Louis I learned this: to speak out, to shut up, to write it down, to keep it in, to move in, to move out, to instigate, to reciprocate, to crawl on my hands and knees across the wooden floorboards of U City apartments and beg for mercy. I learned to write in a way I didn't know existed before, I learned to drink until I loved it, and keep going until I hated it. I camped once, in a hatchback and long before Blair Witch came out, I walked for what seemed like miles in the freezing cold of winter, through the woods outside Laumeier Sculpture Park just to avoid paying parking. I went down to Washington. I did art, I was art. I kept it to myself and I dressed in black. I spent my final college days at coffee happy hour in the loop, drinking mochas until we shook so hard, there was no choice but to move to the Red Sea and drink pitcher after pitcher to calm our nerves.

Note to the St. Louis tourism board: don't hire me, as tempted as you may be. Sure, I have that strange St. Louis pride. I have that collective nostalgia—which I paid for with time, not experience—so that I could pretend to mourn along with the rest of the city when the Arena crumbled. When a building I had never stepped inside, dedicated to a sport I don't enjoy was erased from the landscape. Today, when people ask me where I'm from, I cop to St. Louis and not just because it was the last stop on the train line. You're guaranteed a good response. Everyone's been to St. Louis at least once. And, if not, they've got an uncle who has.

I tell people it's a "good city" and nod blankly when talk turns to the Cards or the Rams. It's painfully evident now I had no business taking up air in a town trying hard to be all about sports. But I do miss St. Louis. I miss knowing that I exist there, that I have plenty of proof to back it up, in terms of tomes and legends, if only in my own mind. I miss being in a place where solitude can be combated, whether you want it or not, with a mere trip to Schnucks.

I miss the opportunities, the ones taken as much as those filed for later use. Maybe there's a Starbucks in the Loop, but there's still music in clubs and a big, fat park smack in the middle and a bunch of free museums. FREE. And that I miss. I went to the art museum plenty of times, even if I only rarely made it past the front lawn. I've always found just as much art wondering how long it would take to roll to the bottom of the hill and if you did would you land in the water and if so would anyone save you as inside the building. The statue's nice, you know?

Still, the things I miss most about St. Louis, the things that make me want to tell you to stay, are things you will never find, not even equipped with the most intricate map. I can't draw them for you in a cutthroat game of Pictionary. I can't describe what I'm carrying inside me or what's still out there somewhere. I miss people, yes, but St. Louis people have one thing in common...they will ALWAYS show up again. I miss places, too, but only in the context of events long past or situations I can't re-create without a time machine.

I believe, though, that it is all still there. If you ever find yourself wondering just what blows those tumbleweeds through the barren streets of downtown St. Louis on any given weeknight, I think it's me. It's my life, or pieces of it, a bizarre collection of firsts and lasts that occurred over the course of my years there, in some divine order I'm yet able to puzzle together. But I keep coming back to try.

Julia Smillie is a freelance writer living in Indianapolis, IN. Her semi-regular, semi-amusing column appears on her web site at www8.50megs.com/jcsmillie. She has excellent table