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Ann Arbor, Mi Amor

By [Julia Smillie](#)

At some point along the way, St. Louis became where I was from. Technically, I was born in [Glasgow, Scotland](#), but the distance — in both time and miles — seems to keep growing and it's hard to always have to explain away the lack of an accent. (For the record: a quarter-century on this side of the pond and a desire to sound like everyone else in sixth grade pretty much sums it up.) And then, yes, I have lived in Boston, [Louisville](#), [Asheville](#) and [Indianapolis](#).

Now, I am approaching the end of an eight-month stint in Ann Arbor, Michigan, thanks to my husband's inclusion as one of the esteemed [Knight-Wallace Journalism Fellows](#) for the 2005-2006 academic year. During the past months, I've introduced myself to what seems like legions of folk — both here in Ann Arbor and during our fellowship trips abroad to Buenos Aires and Argentina. Inevitably, they ask where I am from and, unfailingly, I tell them I am from St. Louis.

The good news is that most people have at least *heard* of St. Louis, even if a number of them — overseas and otherwise — insist on calling it St. Louie. (Then again, I bristle at being called Julie, so perhaps it's just a personal grudge against a particular diphthong.) Unfortunately, they never seem to know much beyond that. Those stateside will invoke the Cardinals or the Rams. There may be a mention of the blues (hockey or musical) or perhaps the Arch. And virtually everyone has passed through St. Louis, so the city is doing its job as gateway to the west — and, at times, to the east, north and south.

In response, I usually tell them of the city's great museums and fabulous Forest Park and did I mention the cost of living is super low? I've spent the majority of the past 18 years in St. Louis, more time by far than I've ever spent anywhere else. It seems right to defend her. So why do I feel like I'm cheating on a lover when I confess that I've spent this year falling madly in love with [Ann Arbor](#)?

I've been trying for a nearly two decades to bend and shape St. Louis to fit what I want from my home town — easy access, intellectual stimulation, culture, progressive politics and a tight-knit, cohesive writing community. Then I stepped into this little college town and found it already exists.

Within a week of moving to Ann Arbor, I knew this was a place I could live — and live very differently than in St. Louis. This is a college town in the truest sense of the word — the small downtown area is centered around the [University](#)



of Michigan campus. That means in a compact and perfectly walkable area, I have access to book shops big and small, clothing stores, two art house movie theaters, several venues for live music, and plenty of restaurants, bars and coffee shops — the latter perfectly content to give away unlimited free wireless internet access for the price of a small cup of joe.



The campus itself offers a daily smorgasbord of activities ranging from visiting exhibits at the art museum to free movie showings to student-run theater productions to really boring lectures you'd never go to but feel smarter just knowing they're there. There's never nothing to do, and it's also easy to get to it all and do it. Plus, there's that *energy* in the air here. People are doing things, learning things, becoming things. It feels contagious.

Naturally, I've been comparing it to the life we'll return to in St. Louis soon and I hate to say it but, at this juncture in my life, the old homestead is losing my faith. I don't want to spend any more time in my car, driving twenty minutes in order to get just about anywhere. (I can go days in Ann Arbor, if I want, without even getting in one.) I don't want to live somewhere so vast I feel like I hardly know it after 18 years and, worst of all, don't have much inclination to learn.

As a writer, I often feel like there's more competition than support in St. Louis. A city of our size — with so many colleges — should be churning out notables like a literary machine. But it's not happening. I still don't understand why, but I'm not sure I want to spend any more time wondering about it.

Feeling part of a community in St. Louis — for me, anyway — has always required a great deal of effort and energy. Ann Arbor's used to people coming and going, so everyone sort of belongs, by default. No one would dream of asking you where you went to high school because it's not taken for granted that you're from here.

People claim Ann Arbor's homogenous, and I can't say much in its defense. As a whole, its permanent population is very white. I'm not sure, however, that's much different than in a lot of the neighborhoods in the St. Louis area. Plus, if you take into account the student and academic community here, I hear more accents from foreign nations on a one-block jaunt in Ann Arbor than I do just about anywhere in St. Louis.

And I'm okay with being a part of a town red-staters uncleverly refer to as The People's Republic of Ann Arbor. I find the number of "Impeach Bush" signs in the yard greatly comforting and it's nice to be in a place where the majority of people think the way you do. I like fitting in. I like being understood. I like feeling like I'm surrounded by people who "get it." In St. Louis, my neighbors' bumper stickers and front porch flags just make me depressed.

There's nothing I really miss about being a part of a bigger city. The usual small-town complaints — no access to independent films, great musical acts, art and culture — don't apply here. Musicians love Ann Arbor and go out of their way to play here. We've seen everyone from Youssou N'Dour in the 4,000-seat Hill Auditorium to Jeff Tweedy at the 1,700-seat Michigan Theater to Billy Bragg in the intimate confines of The Ark's 400 seats.

Ann Arbor has its drawbacks, of course. Yes, it's cold here — but as someone who melts in the St. Louis summers, I'll take it. And while the cost of living isn't bad — restaurant prices and groceries are comparable — the housing



prices are astronomical. A house the size of our modest bungalow in St. Louis would cost us nearly double in Ann Arbor. People, this isn't New York!



There is one thing I do miss about St. Louis, however: the people. Many of the best people I've known in my life, the ones who have influenced and affected me, are in St. Louis. Those people, in fact, have been the main reason my husband and I have stayed put for so long. We worked so hard to establish and maintain those precious friendships that it has seemed nearly impossible to think of leaving.

Now, we wouldn't object to making Ann Arbor our home at some point in the future. It's not that St. Louis isn't the right city for us — it's just that, it turns out, we may not be the right people for St. Louis. But when people from Ann Arbor ask us about our hometown, we tell them — without fail — that it's a fabulous city, a place they should see and know and love. And we mean it.

Julia Smillie is a freelance writer, torn between two lovers, but probably not feeling like a fool. Find more of her writings at [her website](#).