

It's one thing to move as a child, leaving behind dear friends and playmates against your will and then being the "new kid" in class, feeling awkward and having to prove yourself to a fresh group of peers. Your parents decide they want a different life, and you have to grudgingly go along with it, knowing that a 13-year-old's opinion is nothing to that of these all-knowing adults.

It's an entirely different ball game to *make* the decision to leave so many familiar faces, knowing it will be difficult to say goodbye to everything you know (people and places like the local supermarkets with the best subs, and divey haunts with run runners cold enough to give you 10 brain freezes) just to go back to an old place that really made you happy.

On May 13, 2023, I woke up around 4 a.m. in my Florida bedroom to pack up the last of my essentials that I could squeeze into my car before saying goodbye to life as I knew it. Things that you bring to a semi-permanent residence that you've never seen in person and didn't actually sign a lease for. Pillows, a cozy mauve blanket, a Ninja 9-in-1 air fryer/toaster oven (you bet I was taking that), and Sofia the Unicorn Squishmallow, who I would certainly need to keep me company at night.

From the swamps of Gainesville to the old palms and EDM mecca of Miami, Florida is in my blood. But the Brooklyn I grew up with from birth til eighth grade didn't quite leave me. Going from a melting pot of characters in an inner-city school to a mostly white Palm Beach County suburb was not my favorite part of being a teenager. Boys' names in my classes turned from Anthony, Michael and John to Travis, Kyle and Garrett. The accent I didn't know I had would come out in spurts, and people commented, laughed, tried to imitate it, and I wouldn't know whether they actually admired me or were just snickering behind my back.

Bay Ridge, Brooklyn is what the New York Times called in 2020 "a small town in a big city." I lived in a sprawling pink-bricked apartment building on Shore Road, just massive, with a small green oasis in the middle. Just across the street lay the path to Shore Road Park, where I rode my pink and white Barbie bicycle with training wheels, and where my 10-year-old cousin unscrewed said wheels and tried and failed to teach me how to ride without them. Just beyond the park, the sunset would glisten on the waters of Upper New York Bay, where the city put a fireworks barge right in front of our apartment on the Fourth of July 2000.

These are the places I thought about as my friend Adele and I got into my car at 5:30 a.m. and left Palm Beach Gardens and sailed onto I-95. Years of contemplating moving back to Brooklyn and then deciding I couldn't, from failed relationships to toxic friendships to career changes, all led to this. Giving myself a May deadline to move had proved to be stressful, but I somehow found a Facebook apartment.

I thought about how damn great a place Bay Ridge was to grow up. I thought about Owls Head Park, which held an annual Halloween Walk, and how in seventh grade I chose to dress as Dr. Evil, wearing gray sweats and a bald cap. How my friend Arianna dressed as grapes, balloons pinned to her body, and my friend Amy dressed as a white gangsta, when it was still OK to do

that kind of thing. I thought about why I was forced to leave a place that made me feel so good, especially once moving to Florida actually made things worse for me and my family.

After 17 hours of driving and listening to a wild true crime podcast, we arrived in my sublet on May 15, in an area called Ocean Hill that was definitely not Bushwick as advertised. I had no clue what lay ahead, whether I actually made the right decision, whether I was crazy or the most sane I had ever been in my life, whether I'd ever block out the image of a man fully smashing a rat with a shovel on the day I moved out. But I did know that something finally, finally clicked into place for me. And it felt right.

In a sense, moving to Brooklyn as an adult is me taking back a part of my life that I never got. I got the second hole in both my earlobes that I begged my mom for in sixth grade, I reconnected with the family I lost in my teen years, I got to babysit my niece and be the "cool aunt" that she needed.

I'm 33 years old, struggling with my identity as both a Floridian and Brooklynite, but I'm starting to embrace the fact that maybe this duality is a good thing, having experiences in two completely different states. Maybe I don't have to choose one. Maybe *I'm* the melting pot and don't have to stress when people ask where I'm from. They'll still get a long explanation, and I just won't care.