I sat in a tire swing in my grandpa’s forest dreaming of Honolulu, Paris, London, and Naples. They were the faux postcards printed on my child-sized suitcase, a gift specifically designated for travel between my house and my grandparents’ cabin. I imagined pineapples teetering atop women’s heads and pizzas as big as cars. I tucked my dirty feet into the groove of the tire, stood up, and propelled myself into the sunlight, glistening between outstretched arms of tree branches, imagining the jungles that awaited me. I just had to grow up and get the heck out of Indiana. And that’s what I did.

Going to college in Ohio was my first real conquest. I felt like a big shot driving across the state line to my own campus, my own dorm, my own state full of people that were not from Indiana. All of my friends had gone to Indiana State or the University of Indianapolis, but I broke free from the cornfields. O-HI-O. I had conquered the Midwest and was ready for the full-on thrill of wearing a black beret in old Paris. Except all of those hours of daydreaming about cafes and black turtlenecks, they didn’t quite translate into great study habits. When I failed basic French, the study-abroad counselor patted my hand and asked, “How about England?”
My mother’s hands trembled as she waved goodbye at the international gate of the airport. She knew I had the potential to never come back, and her only words of advice were, “Don’t date any foreign boys!” But I did. And I fell in love with an English filmmaker who spoke Norwegian and beautiful French. If there was ever a question that I’d move back to Indiana, six months in England squelched it. Dancing shoes dangled from my hand as I walked barefoot through London’s Regent Street. I saw the twinkling lights of Paris reflected in the Seine at the stroke of midnight. And when my English boyfriend kissed me at that moment on Pont Neuf, I had to hang my head between my knees to stop from hyperventilating. I ordered pizza in Napoli and discovered that I love sardines. I saw Scotland and Ireland, Germany and Austria, Hungry and the Czech Republic. I saw a world bigger than I had ever dreamed, and I was never going back.

Except that I kind of had to if I wanted to get my degree, so I flew back to Ohio with an Englishman in tow. My parents worried. I was home, but for how long? My mother fretted over future grandchildren that would live even farther than Timbuktu. But one person was excited and, in the week before I started school again, my grandpa drove from his cabin in southern Indiana three hours up the center of the state to visit me at my parents’ house. He wanted to see my traveling pictures.

We sat with my album and he asked a lot of questions. He wanted to know what I thought of the train system in Berlin. He asked if I saw the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He wanted to know where I would go next, and then he showed me his albums. In the time I had spent growing up, my grandpa had traveled all over the world. In the ‘70s he’d ridden his motorcycle across 48 states. Now he wanted his feet to touch every country on this Earth, having already managed to see half of them. I was twenty-one years old when he told me his goal, and I decided that day that I was going to try to beat him to it.
I moved to London after graduation and found a flat with my Englishman. I worked for a children's book publisher and he edited advertising reels. We saw more of Europe with every break we got and flew back to Indiana each Christmas, where my grandpa would take out his pictures to show us the places he'd been. China. Ecuador. Egypt. Russia. Always someplace new, and he was zipping through them far faster than I could, with retirement giving him the competitor's advantage.

When the Englishman and I got engaged, Grandpa said, "Well, how 'bout that. Guess I'll be seeing you in England next year." But a rainy Indiana summer was cheaper than rainy London, and Grandpa was there with his umbrella just the same.

We'd planned to honeymoon in Singapore and Malaysia. But then the SARS virus hit. Our travel agent convinced us that Belize and Guatemala were between hurricane seasons, nice and cheap, and they were two countries where my grandpa hadn't been. So I checked them off my list and I finally got to spread my arms out wide on an inner tube floating down a potentially crocodile-filled river in the middle of the Belizean jungle. My grandpa was impressed. We returned with a couple of bottles of the local beer and a handcrafted tribal mask to hang on the wall of our first house, not in London or Indiana, but in our brand-new town of Berkeley, California.

But then my grandma got sick. Cancer took one of her breasts and she fought for survival most of the year. Grandpa stayed home to take care of her, and Grandma threatened to leave him if he didn't. With blood clots in his legs and a breathing apparatus he now needed at night, my grandpa declared his international traveling days at an end.

I saw Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, but described the streets of Saigon to my grandpa in deeper detail than I'd ever done before—how you step into the traffic slowly, breathing deeply, methodically, allowing motorbikes to whiz in front of you and in back of you, legs of the passengers brushing your own, because
if you hesitate that’s when you’re in trouble in a city with no stop signs. My grandpa had never seen Vietnam and never would.

We spent most of the following Christmas break with my grandpa, watching him work iron in his blacksmith shop. He gave us each a shot of bourbon in our tea when we came in out of the cold and encouraged my grandma’s dog, Trudy, to snuggle up on our feet. We sat in his cabin in the woods with the snow coming down and something felt different to me. I felt at peace, not restless. I felt at home in Indiana for maybe the first time in my life.

Just because he’d sworn off planes didn’t mean that my grandpa stopped traveling altogether, and in those cold-weather days he described to us the sunsets over the mountains of Chama, New Mexico. Part of his world travels had been spent riding and repairing steam trains, and he wanted us to go with him in the summertime to see a train that still ran through the Southwestern states.

“You won’t believe how it feels out here, so still and beautiful,” my husband said, describing the inky night skies and wide-open landscapes of daybreak. He was making a documentary about my grandpa and had driven out to New Mexico ahead of me. “It’s easier to think out here. You’ll see. It will change you.” But I didn’t believe him. We’d been grinding out an existence in Los Angeles. I was eking the life out of myself during the day as a producer for Disney and driving across town at night to get my master’s at USC. I guess you could say I wasn’t looking around very much beyond the 110 and 5 freeways. With only two weeks of vacation time and two families to visit each year, adventures become a deck chair with a nice, big view of the weeds I hadn’t pulled.

But when I landed in Santa Fe, everything did change. The air was dry and my spirit felt malleable. I got in the rental car, my grandpa at the wheel, my husband in the backseat, their work clothes covered in dust, faces with big puppy-like grins. My husband wrapped his arms around my shoulders. As we drove away, my grandpa reached over and placed his hand on mine. “We sure are glad to see you,” he said, and at that moment I
couldn’t remember a time I had felt so loved in all my life. It was like coming home.

On the drive to Chama, across the mesa and through the mountains, my grandpa told us the story of the power-company strike in the early ’80s when he and my uncles took their idle days to clear a spot of land in a forest and build his cabin from the ground up. “By the time we went back to work, the cabin was built,” he said, and then he told us that in a couple of years he’s going to sell it. My grandma had won the fight against cancer, but they feared it would return. They needed to move closer to town and retire from the upkeep of a home in the woods. We drove for a while in silence before he added, “It’s time to move on.”

I wondered if it was time to move on, too, and my husband started asking the same thing over the next few months. We’d been moving from city to city for 10 years but hadn’t found a home. Being with Grandpa, being in the mountains where the traffic noise is nonexistent and no one rushes to do anything, that felt like home.

My husband and I could live in any of the 50 states, Europe, Australia, or New Zealand, but we can’t stop thinking about my grandpa’s cabin and a permanent place to call our own. I pray that the cancer doesn’t return and that the move into town will be a happy one for my grandparents. I feel better knowing that I’ll be close by, because when my grandparents make that shift in their lives, my husband and I will be making a shift in ours, too.

I’m headed back home with the suitcase that’s seen London, Paris, and Naples, Englishman in tow. We’re putting a down payment on a tire swing, a gravel driveway, and a coldwater creek that reflects fireflies on hot summer nights. We’re buying that cabin that my grandpa built and his ten acres of woods, located just 30 minutes’ drive from an international airport. And when we decide to finally have children of our own, they will, to their grandparents’ delight, live a whole lot closer than Timbuktu.