

## A Small Worm in the Big Apple

When I was a child, I had impossible, fantastic dreams. I wanted to be a princess, kiss a frog, find my prince charming and live in a grand castle; I wanted to have a unicorn.

As I grew older and learned, tragically, that unicorns didn't exist and my childhood dreams were a farce, I began to want other things. I started dreaming of seeing Venice, Italy. Vatican City, Rome, Barcelona, Greece- these places took on an air of mystery, excitement, fantasy that I could almost reach out and touch. Unfortunately, I cast them off as silly childhood imaginings as well; I never imagined I would get to see these places. In my mind's eye, I saw my life twenty years in the future much the same as it is today: still living in the same tiny town, same friends; just a job in place of school and maybe a husband, 2.5 kids, and a white picket fence. That is... until my junior year of high school.

It was May 2013 and I was ecstatic. Slightly because the school year was basically over, but mainly because I was going to New York City! I'd paid the nearly \$600 fee for the trip, had my bags packed, and I was ready to go.

The drive north was spent in a gigantic charter bus surrounded by friends and teachers, talking and laughing about things I don't, and probably won't ever, remember. But we were surrounded by an atmosphere of freedom, a sense of adventure; it is that

feeling of flying up to the highest crest of a soaring roller coaster, that breathtaking, exhilarating moment when time stops and one is hanging precariously in the anticipation of the plunge that I can't forget. Along the way we stopped at greasy fast food restaurants and dirty gas stations not unlike the ones in my own hometown, but with only the road signs pinning us to a map. If only for a while we were our own brand new people; all the strings tying us to expectations, an insignificant plot of land, or our too carefully planned futures temporarily severed.

Finally, after roughly a ten hour drive, I saw the first green sign announcing New York City. It was the first of 700 pictures I would take over four days. The first stop was the hotel, just outside the city, in New Jersey. From my room we had a beautiful view of the harbor and the infamous city skyline- though, already in typical New York fashion, we were hurrying about. The trip took a bit longer than planned, and once we were all checked into the hotel we only had about a half hour to freshen up and rush back to the buses to be thrust headfirst into the nightlife of the city. That night I experienced my first exhilarating, mad dash across packed, noisy New York streets, doing my best not to get lost, ran over, or trampled. My southern "I'm sorry" and "Excuse me" were promptly ignored, gawked at, or simply swallowed in the swarm of voices, honking horns, and flashing billboards. I quickly learned that people acted much differently here; there were no friendly strangers saying "Have a good day, doll." It was like thousands of individual

worlds colliding in the streets, completely oblivious of one another, just trying to be on their way as quickly as possible.

Over the course of the next three days, I experienced two Broadway plays, shopping in Times Square, and Madam Tusso's Wax Museum. At some point I was getting locked inside a tiny, musty shop with a hidden door like something straight out of a black and white mystery flick, two thugs who could give the Hulk a run for his money, and a tiny lady obviously running from the cops on Canal Street. I bought a pretzel from a shady street vendor, shared lunch with a man on the street, and got rained on all day long. And I loved it.

During those four days, I felt like a woman of the world. I was in a huge city, populated by thousands upon thousands of beautiful independent people. And *I* was walking the streets with them. I wasn't in my small town anymore, I was out experiencing the world, seeing some of the greatest sights in the country. Symbols of freedom, America, and democracy: the Empire State Building, Rockefeller Center, the 9/11 memorial, the Statue of Liberty. I was doing what some have only ever dreamed of doing. And suddenly, places like Venice, Rome, and the Vatican City didn't seem so unobtainable anymore. Suddenly I could go anywhere I wanted, be anyone I wanted to be. Seeing the city, a world so different from my own, gave me a peek into how vast and broad the world really is, and how much I have left to see.