

“I’m sorry, but there are aspects of your personality that make me not want to be intimate with you,” Nate said, lying on his right side, back toward me and breath just inches from the tote bags that lined the inside wall of the van. They held things like books we couldn’t part with, random gadgets and their chords, some clothing, and other miscellaneous items we probably didn’t need to have with us inside living quarters the size of a small walk-in closet.

It was October 27th and it was the day before my 29thth birthday. It was an exceptionally cold night to be sleeping in a vehicle parked on a residential side street in Allston, Massachusetts—next to someone I’d met only three months earlier.

We had just finished our nightly ritual of ‘closing up the van’ by drawing together a set of blackout curtains that hung snugly from a piece of taut wire, the two drapes pieced together by vertically adhered strips of Velcro. That set of curtains separated the driver and passenger seats from the back of the van where, two months earlier, Nate had pulled out both rows of bucket seats and, with the help of my dad, built in the platform bed, extra battery storage, and a secret safety lockbox. Nate had also hand cut and glued Velcro onto blackout curtains that lined all the windows in the back of the van. We opened them during the day while driving, closed them if we left the van for more than a few hours, and used them to insulate our incognito shelter at night.

Nate lay motionless beside me, our bodies buried beneath separate sleeping bags, topped with layers of shared blankets. I, in a ski hat and gloves, felt paralyzed and angry. I felt afraid and in love. I remained on my back staring up into the darkness, hyperaware of Nate’s deep silence. It seemed hard to breathe. The air was still and I was lost for words. My heart and throat felt pinched, like they were being squeezed by giant tongs. I pictured Neo reaching into my chest and magically releasing the pressure, like that time he removed a bullet from Trinity’s heart.

Earlier that day, we celebrated the placement of our first “Will Travel for Vegan Food was here” window decal at Veggie Galaxy in Boston. Nate and I had both been living in Boston before the trip began, and the restaurant was newly open—about two months—so it seemed a fitting starting point for what would lead to hundreds of placed decals across the country.

I was over the moon that a restaurant had agreed to place one of the decals on their street-facing picture window. Nate snapped a photo of me standing bundled up outside the restaurant, hands pressed karate chopping-style against the glass, on either side of the decal, showcasing it with a Vanna White flair. It was Nate’s idea to order a box of these three by four-inch, brown-with-white-lettering static cling decals. I agreed it was a terrific way to leave a little something behind at each of our stops.

I watched my breath escape above me once more before turning onto my left side. The chilly air swooped beneath the blankets as I moved, and I felt Nate’s body inch farther away.

Now back-to-back, with an agonizing two-inch gap between us, I closed my eyes tightly, releasing a few silent tears. I tucked my freezing nose into the sleeping bag, pressed my cheek deeper into the pillow, and tortured myself to sleep by reminiscing about the Mach 20 courtship and its equally speedy decline that had brought us here.

It would be another three months before I’d have the courage to tell Nate that I think it’d be best if I continued on without him.

It was almost exactly one year earlier that it all seemed so impossible—scummy even. But I took the words that sat there in front of me on the computer screen as a directive, taunting me with their profound intangibility.

I spent months devouring blog post after book, absorbing unbelievable stories about people who make a living off of digital businesses they created via single websites, learning about people who were traveling all over the world, stopping to work wherever they pleased, whenever they wanted, so long as they had an internet connection. Could it be true? Is it really doable, or just a means to sell me something?

I closed the browser window for artofnonconformity.com, set the computer to sleep mode, and pushed into the desk with both hands, rolling the cushy chair backwards. I collected my purse from under the desk and let my coworker Katie know that I was headed out for my lunch break.

While walking to the elevator, I glanced down into my bag to see the orange book cover of Tim Ferriss' *The 4-Hour Workweek* sitting unassumingly inside. I couldn't wait to continue reading about the "new rich." I had already finished reading *Crush It!* by Gary Vaynerchuk and was feeling more inspired than ever to start my own business. But what? I was lost on ideas, though I couldn't stop thinking about traveling indefinitely, working from the road, and living with fewer possessions.

My parents have so many things. A house FULL of things. Things they don't use—my things, their things, my brother's things. My grandparents collected lots of things too. From my earliest memory, I recall their tiny house in Troy, New York, overflowing with hidden treasures, newspapers from decades passed, dolls, toys, and trinkets from my mom's childhood. I understand the reasons for collecting things, and the sentimental value in keeping that stuff around. But I was also having trouble with the idea of purchasing a home that I would start filling with my things.

Tim's and Gary's books are what led me to the likes of Chris Guillebeau, Corbett Barr, Adam Baker, Pat Flynn, and Marie Forleo, among others. I'd come home from my nine-to-five job, work a few hours for my part-time job, and then spend the rest of the night and early mornings reading about full-time nomads, van-dwellers, lifestyle designers, entrepreneurs, and game changers. The wheels started turning, and I found myself feverishly scribbling notes and daydreaming about becoming a real business owner, a real entrepreneur. A female entrepreneur! It sounded fancy—luxurious, even.

It wasn't just the idea of designing my life around what I most loved, or even working for myself. What really pulled me in was how different my current life path was to the one I now felt deeply drawn to.

What I told myself about growing up included going to college, then to graduate school, landing a stable job, buying a home, and starting a family, all while spending the rest of my life paying off student loans and mortgage debt. Once I'd reached the 'stable job' part of equation, including having wracked up well over \$60,000 in student loans from grad school, I was definitely not feeling the homeowner or family-starter end of things.

I didn't necessarily feel bad about not wishing to live the American Dream, but it certainly left me questioning where my life was headed and if I'd truly be happy continuing down the road I was on.

I felt a sense of urgency after closing the final chapter to yet another book—one I'd read about two years before the 'lifestyle designers' and nomads appeared before me—Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*.

A friend suggested I read it after she'd heard me talk about how I'd like to travel a bit someday. Having only ever been to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls once, Vancouver for a few days, and maybe a half a dozen or so states, I hadn't done much traveling in my 28 years. There was a part of me that had become tired of hearing myself talk about wanting to travel, but not actually doing anything about it.

My favorite part of the day had become walking to the Clover Food Lab Truck in Dewey Square, near South Station, during lunch breaks from my full-time job as a Communications Specialist for the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA). It was my second "real-life human job" as one of my friends would say (i.e., an adult, career-focused job).

I'd almost always order the chickpea falafel with a side of rosemary fries and a blueberry lemonade. There was nothing like settling into the shade of one of the small park trees while balancing a deliciously messy meal in one hand, and a new book about travel or entrepreneurship in the other.

After I'd finished reading a few chapters one afternoon, I suddenly felt overwhelmed by unknown possibilities. With a full belly, I lied back on the grass, and propped my head up with the orange book. Maybe the know-how would seep into my brain if I just stayed there for a while. I closed my eyes and let the still air fill my chest. I had never meditated before, but I'm pretty sure this was as close to something akin to mediation that I'd ever done.

Allowing my mind to slow down and focus on listening to the sounds around me—the leaves rustling in the breeze, quiet conversations from other lunch-breakers, and sparrows' songs—I took a deep breath in and made a quiet promise to myself for that spring: I, too, would shoot for the stars.

One afternoon following a pleasant lunch full of business brainstorming and goal setting between myself and a pad and pen, I returned to my cubicle and settled in for the last haul of the day. ‘Click.’ Two hundred new emails since lunch. Awesome. I rolled my head and neck fully around—once to the left and once to the right—gave a big two-arm stretch upward, and settled my hands lightly atop the keyboard. With my left fingers lightly resting upon A, S, D, F, and right on J, K, L, colon/semicolon, I took a deep breath in, and as I exhaled, BAM! “Will Travel for Vegan Food” flashed before my eyes. What? Where? It practically shot me straight out of my chair from the base of my heels. Electric! Suddenly I realized I had opened a new email window and was drafting a note to my parents outlining this crazy idea that JUST came to me—to maybe, possibly, hopefully travel the country in search of vegan food!

“Yes, I’ll live out of my car, come up with a plan to generate donations, and travel full-time while writing about the restaurants, and maybe even interviewing restaurant owners!” I wrote.

A few days later, Dad replied, “Cool idea, Kris!”

It felt like a virtual pat on the head, as if to say, “Well, isn’t that a cute idea that probably won’t happen because it’s too risky and, really, who would do that anyway?”

I’d find out later, long after the journey was well underway, that my dad had initially believed the trip was a bad idea. He didn’t want to discourage me, but was concerned that I’d be leaving a secure job. He thought I’d be throwing away my career path, and that relying on donations was not sustainable.

Even though, at that point, I’d been vegan for about four years and was, in that very moment, sitting behind a desk at a nonprofit animal welfare organization—doing work that not only enabled me to put my graduate degree to use, but also felt aligned with my moral and ethical beliefs—I still felt like I hadn’t quite hit my ‘yes, this is exactly what I should be doing with my life’ stride. Then again, part of me had succumbed to the idea that knowing my life’s purpose wasn’t an actual thing. That it’s something people just say in order to feel better about the whole ‘why we’re here’ thing.

But when the words “Will Travel For Vegan Food” presented themselves to me, it was the most awake I’d ever felt about what I needed to do: help spread the word about veganism by showcasing how easy it is to travel while eating only vegan foods. I’d use my marketing and communications background to feature the restaurants I’d visit, while fulfilling my desire to travel and explore this beautiful country!

It all made so much sense, in fact, that I never once questioned whether or not it should be done. I felt a deep gut-knowing that this project was exactly what I was meant to do, and the potential that it could positively impact the lives of many, including my own, was real and true.

Over-the-top excited about the prospect of such an adventure, I began talking about it so much that it seemed as though the pieces started to move in that direction almost on their own. Opportunities arose, incredible resources surfaced, and new people came into my life—all so perfectly timed to the rhythm and flawless cadence of this dance toward an adventure like nothing I’d ever before imagined.

By early spring 2011, I decided to be more deliberate about the idea of such an endeavor. I gave my notice at the WSPA and began working remotely for a vegan marketing company in their social media department. I also started my own LLC to house freelance work and upcoming projects, began teaching myself how to set up a WordPress website in order to create my first for-profit business model, and more thoroughly formulated the steps I’d need to take in order to spend a year driving, writing, and eating my way through the United States.

It was all happening quickly and, before I knew it, I was welcoming strangers from Craigslist into my apartment so they could pick up items I had posted for sale. I mailed most of my book collection off to various friends, and—in agreement with my housemates—left behind my bed, loveseat, some shelving, and the television. The few things I couldn’t sell or donate were packed into boxes and stored at my parents’ house in upstate New York.

Unlike most of the books I read that partially inspired my journey, I didn't have a major meltdown or breakthrough or hit rock bottom to trigger my desire to leave, which made me feel even crazier than I already did about the whole thing. Mostly it was that I felt unsettled. And I wasn't just planning to leave for a week or a month, but for as long as it would take to eat at every vegan restaurant in the United States. Or maybe—as it would turn out—for as long as it would take to find myself.

I initially intended to live out of my little grape-purple Honda Civic hatchback. It was a wisp of a thing, but it served me well those few years in Boston. Unfortunately, just a couple of months before I was to set out on the journey, someone jacked my little car, stripped it, and left it sitting in front of his mom's house for the cops to find about a month later.

Perhaps everything happens for a reason though. As a result of my beloved, tiny car being left but a shell, I used the money from selling its frame to help purchase the vehicle that would later become synonymous with the Will Travel for Vegan Food project: a huge forest green G20 Chevy Sports van. She was an older gal, but was in pretty good condition. We called her Gertrude—Gerty for short.

When Gerty and I met, it was love at first sight. I'd spent weeks scouring Craigslist for something used, in the \$1,500 price range, and conceivably livable. It was down to Gerty (at the time I called her "The Green Machine") and one other van that I'd dubbed "The Red Dragon," due to its red-and-white striped sides.

Between the kind retired couple, the van's body condition, and overall good vibes, Gerty won by a landslide.¹

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My courtship with Nate was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. He was an intense and steady text messaging fiend. He was romantic and lust-filled, even before we'd made any physical contact. He was unique and—most notably—he was vegan. Let the angels sing! Straight, attractive, single, and age-appropriate vegan men were—err, are—a rare breed.

It felt as though we were about to embark on the ultimate vegan love story to end all vegan love stories, and my desire to make it happen blinded me nearly as much as my hidden fear of jumping into a project, a road trip, a life-altering adventure of this magnitude. I was ready and open, and on the verge of falling hard. He was passionate and pursuing me with more fervor than I'd ever known. By the time we first met—via a local vegan meet-up group on Facebook—I had already sold or donated almost all of my belongings. I was just a few weeks away from moving out of my Somerville apartment and into my parents' house for the final preparatory departure phase. Subconsciously, I was terrified of what it meant to completely flip my life around, and to do it on my own.

"I just can't not know what might happen between us," Nate said, late one night after a Boston area Vegan Drinks event, as we sat in his car parked a block away from my apartment. He had driven me home, where I still shared a bed with Joe, my boyfriend of nearly three years—a person whose ties with me would soon be broken, not because of Nate, but because our lives had already begun moving in opposite directions.

It was one of my last nights in Boston and, as my heart swelled with the idea that this person I'd met only a few weeks prior would consider leaving his life behind just to "see what might happen between us," I looked up and saw Joe dragging the trash barrel from our driveway to the street for the morning pick-up. The proverbial fork in the road suddenly slapped me in the face. In front of me, in the distance, my current life—once defined by a comfortable job, a comfortable apartment, and a comfortable relationship—and that of a new path filled with unknown adventure, storybook romance, and full-time travel.

There was no question; with absolutely every ounce of all I was and all I had been moving toward, the choice was epically clear.