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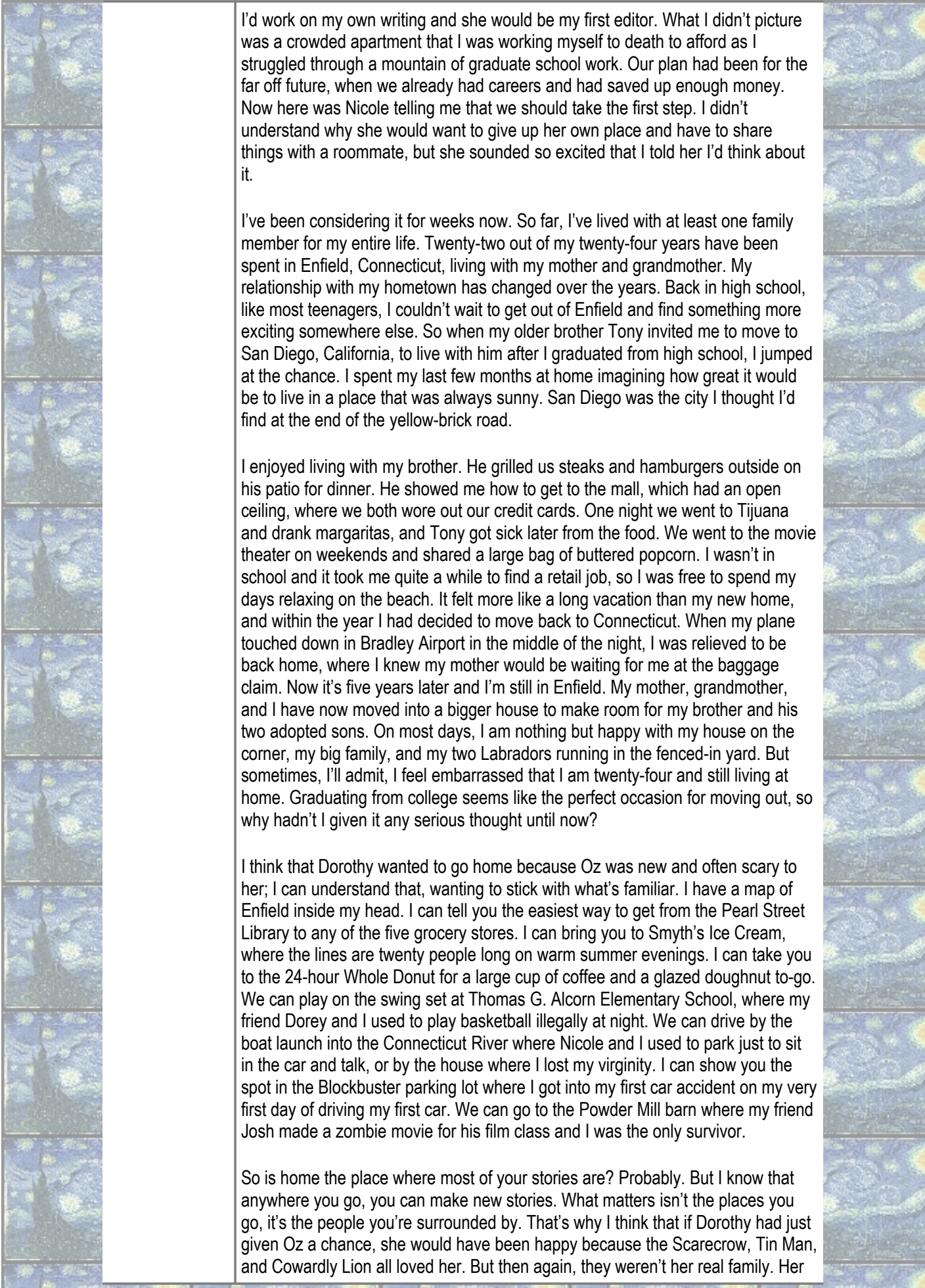
by Tammy Subia

*If I ever go looking for
my heart's desire again,
I won't look any further
than my own backyard.
Because if it isn't there,
I never really lost it to
begin with. –Dorothy*

The thing that I never understood about the film *The Wizard of Oz* was why Dorothy was so eager to get home. Think about it, her home wasn't all that great. Kansas was gray and lonely. This was also during the time of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, so the people in Kansas were dying from dust pneumonia and malnutrition. The film came at the perfect time – when people needed an escape. Oz was just that: bright, fun, magical. Dorothy made great new friends there. Yet all she wanted to do the entire time was go back home to Kansas. Sure, she had a witch trying to kill her in Oz, but still, if I was Dorothy, I think I would have wanted to stay.

Recently, my long-time friend, Nicole, surprised me by asking if I wanted to move in with her when I graduated from Central Connecticut State University in December. Nicole graduated from Westfield State College last year. Once she found a decent job as a customer service representative for Webster Bank, she moved into a small studio apartment in Weymouth, Massachusetts, a town 17.9 miles outside of Boston. I've had many friends who've moved away from home, but they found places with roommates or their boyfriends. Nicole was the first one to live totally on her own. I've visited her once, and despite the size of her apartment, I was impressed because I knew that the space was no one's but hers. Every item in the refrigerator was something that she had bought for herself. Her bathroom was filled with only the products that she used. The walls were decorated with her favorite posters, and every note tacked to the cork board was her own.

Nicole told me that if I moved to Weymouth, we could get a two-bedroom apartment in the same complex. She tried to sell me on living near the city by suggesting that I could look for a writing job there. I remembered our plan, which we first made back in high school and have been discussing ever since. We would rent a house together and open our own small bookstore. In my mind, I'd always pictured the two of us, with Styrofoam cups of coffee in hand, strolling down the street of a small town, walking past the row of little shops until we reached the storefront of our own bookshop. I didn't know the name of the store, but there would be a picture of an open book on the sign. I pictured us unlocking the door, turning on the lights, and opening the cash register. I pictured us at home where



I'd work on my own writing and she would be my first editor. What I didn't picture was a crowded apartment that I was working myself to death to afford as I struggled through a mountain of graduate school work. Our plan had been for the far off future, when we already had careers and had saved up enough money. Now here was Nicole telling me that we should take the first step. I didn't understand why she would want to give up her own place and have to share things with a roommate, but she sounded so excited that I told her I'd think about it.

I've been considering it for weeks now. So far, I've lived with at least one family member for my entire life. Twenty-two out of my twenty-four years have been spent in Enfield, Connecticut, living with my mother and grandmother. My relationship with my hometown has changed over the years. Back in high school, like most teenagers, I couldn't wait to get out of Enfield and find something more exciting somewhere else. So when my older brother Tony invited me to move to San Diego, California, to live with him after I graduated from high school, I jumped at the chance. I spent my last few months at home imagining how great it would be to live in a place that was always sunny. San Diego was the city I thought I'd find at the end of the yellow-brick road.

I enjoyed living with my brother. He grilled us steaks and hamburgers outside on his patio for dinner. He showed me how to get to the mall, which had an open ceiling, where we both wore out our credit cards. One night we went to Tijuana and drank margaritas, and Tony got sick later from the food. We went to the movie theater on weekends and shared a large bag of buttered popcorn. I wasn't in school and it took me quite a while to find a retail job, so I was free to spend my days relaxing on the beach. It felt more like a long vacation than my new home, and within the year I had decided to move back to Connecticut. When my plane touched down in Bradley Airport in the middle of the night, I was relieved to be back home, where I knew my mother would be waiting for me at the baggage claim. Now it's five years later and I'm still in Enfield. My mother, grandmother, and I have now moved into a bigger house to make room for my brother and his two adopted sons. On most days, I am nothing but happy with my house on the corner, my big family, and my two Labradors running in the fenced-in yard. But sometimes, I'll admit, I feel embarrassed that I am twenty-four and still living at home. Graduating from college seems like the perfect occasion for moving out, so why hadn't I given it any serious thought until now?

I think that Dorothy wanted to go home because Oz was new and often scary to her; I can understand that, wanting to stick with what's familiar. I have a map of Enfield inside my head. I can tell you the easiest way to get from the Pearl Street Library to any of the five grocery stores. I can bring you to Smyth's Ice Cream, where the lines are twenty people long on warm summer evenings. I can take you to the 24-hour Whole Donut for a large cup of coffee and a glazed doughnut to-go. We can play on the swing set at Thomas G. Alcorn Elementary School, where my friend Dorey and I used to play basketball illegally at night. We can drive by the boat launch into the Connecticut River where Nicole and I used to park just to sit in the car and talk, or by the house where I lost my virginity. I can show you the spot in the Blockbuster parking lot where I got into my first car accident on my very first day of driving my first car. We can go to the Powder Mill barn where my friend Josh made a zombie movie for his film class and I was the only survivor.

So is home the place where most of your stories are? Probably. But I know that anywhere you go, you can make new stories. What matters isn't the places you go, it's the people you're surrounded by. That's why I think that if Dorothy had just given Oz a chance, she would have been happy because the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion all loved her. But then again, they weren't her real family. Her

Uncle Henry and Aunt Em were waiting for her back in Kansas. So who is to say what the right choice for her was? I know that I have to make this decision myself. I love my family, but friends can also become family over time. I've known Nicole for ten years now, and I can easily imagine what living with her would be like. We have similar personalities and we like a lot of the same things. We're both addicted to coffee, junk food, books, rock music, and horror movies. She's in so many of my stories already. If she wanted us to get an apartment in Enfield, moving in with her would be a no-brainer; but she wants me to leave.

As attached as I am to the place, I am more attached to the people here. Though a part of me cannot imagine leaving my family, another part of me worries that I may soon resent them for keeping me here. Of course, I am free to make my own choice, but I still feel an obligation to stay with them. My brother moved back from California to help my mother buy our house. He gave up his home there. When I told him about Nicole's offer, he immediately joked, "No, you're not allowed. If I'm forty and still have to live at home, then you have to too." I know he wants me to do what is best for me, but even though he didn't really mean it, the words resonated with me. Plus, now that he has adopted his sons, he often counts on me to help him. The five-year-old, AJ, throws himself at me, wrapping his arms around my legs, whenever I come home. Julio, the fourteen-year-old, has already adopted my taste in music and movies, and just told me the other day that he is starting to write a book because he likes my stories. I know everyone would get along just fine without me, but I wonder how I would get along without them. A part of me is scared that I won't be able to handle life out on my own.

In high school I wanted to see all of the country. While I of course haven't seen all of it yet, I've seen quite a bit. I've driven from the east coast of this country to the west one, and I've seen plenty of interesting places, but none of them felt like they could ever be my home. But I know now that's what I'm searching for, a home – not an Oz. Oz is the place you go to when you need an escape from your day-to-day life. It's an adventure, and in the end, it makes you appreciate what you already have. I realize now why Dorothy was never meant to stay in Oz. Kansas was her home. Still, everyone eventually has to grow up and move on; I certainly don't plan to live with my mother my entire life. So how do you know when you're ready? And how do you decide where to go? There's no red sand hourglass or a yellow-brick road to follow. Sometimes I guess you just have to take a chance and hope for the best.

I still haven't figured out what I'm going to do. I could move in with Nicole. Or I could stay where I am for a while longer after I graduate, so I can save up some money. I don't feel pressured to move out just because that's what young adults are expected to do at this age. When I do decide I'm ready to go, I don't have to live with Nicole; I could go anywhere. I don't have ruby slippers, but I have glittery flip-flops and a yellow Ford Escape. Right now my home is right where I am, and I love it; but someday I'll leave, and wherever I end up, I'll just have to build my home again. That's what we do. When you're young, your home is the place you have to live in, but as you get older, you learn how you can create your own home for yourself wherever you go. And if you're lucky, you'll also find an Oz to visit now and then when things get rough.

Tammy Subia is a student at Central Connecticut State University. She plans to enroll in a graduate writing program next year. Her work has been previously published in her university's literary magazine, *The Helix*.

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