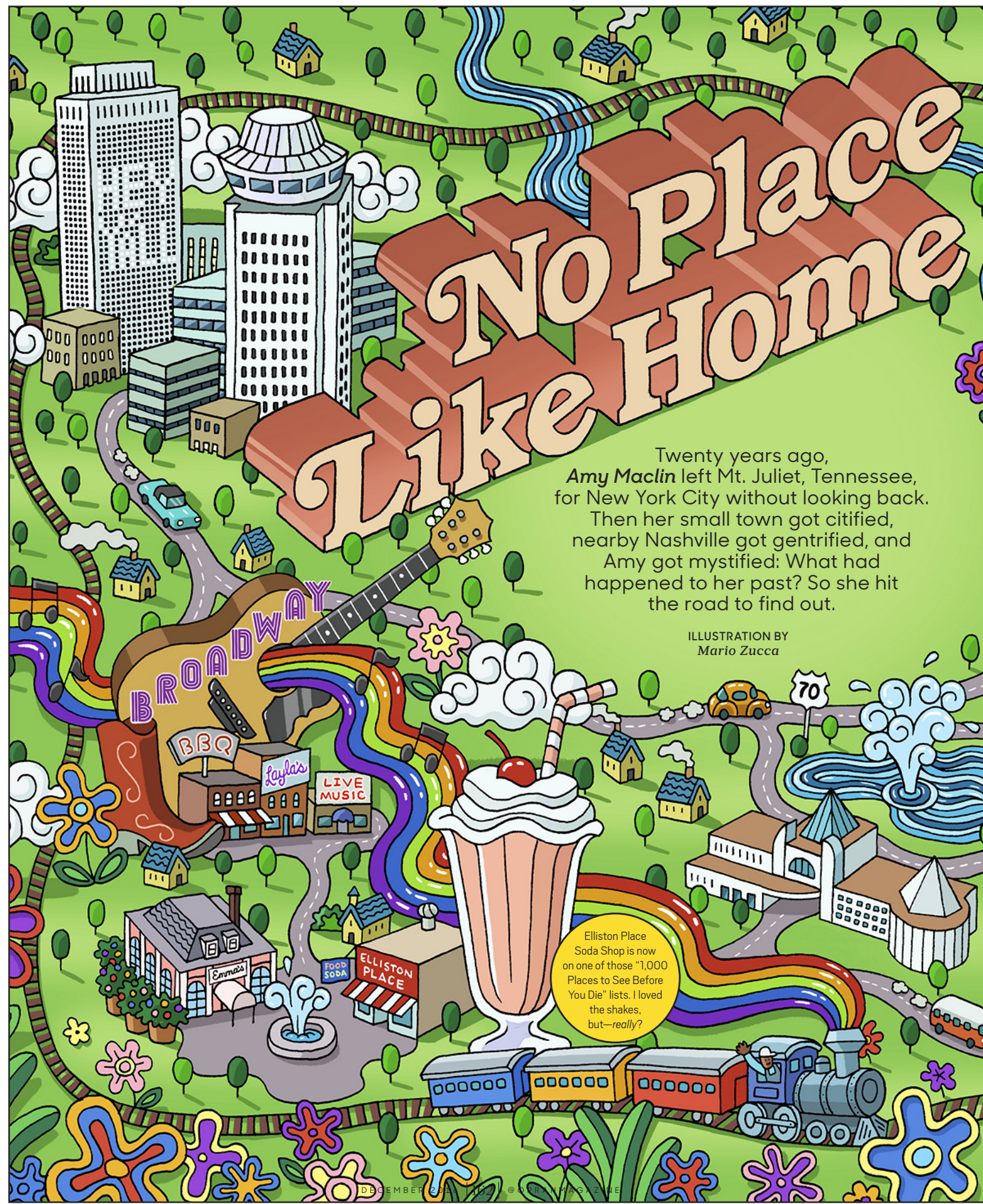




No Place Like Home

Twenty years ago,
Amy Maclin left Mt. Juliet, Tennessee,
for New York City without looking back.
Then her small town got citified,
nearby Nashville got gentrified, and
Amy got mystified: What had
happened to her past? So she hit
the road to find out.

ILLUSTRATION BY
Mario Zucca

Elliston Place
Soda Shop is now
on one of those "1,000
Places to See Before
You Die" lists. I loved
the shakes,
but—really?





WHEN I WAS growing up in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, in the '70s and '80s, there was one stoplight. Our fine-dining options were Dairy Queen and Superburger, housed in a trailer. Each year we celebrated our hometown boy Charlie Daniels with Charlie Daniels Day, and the bluegrass king came out with his fiddle and assured us all that the South was gonna do it again. Whatever that meant.

Now Mt. Juliet Road has gone from two lanes to four, and they can't put in traffic lights fast enough. There's Bar-B-Cutie and Jet's Pizza—and those are just on the lot where my elementary school used to be. There's an amphitheater in Charlie Daniels Park. And right off I-40, sprawling over 103 acres, is an 830,000-square-foot shopping center called Providence MarketPlace, as if the Belk and Best Buy were part of the Lord's divine plan. Earlier this year, Realtor.com named Mt. Juliet (that's JOOL-yet) one of the top 30 boomtowns in America. Ahead of D.C., Philly, and Boston.

Mt. Juliet is booming because Nashville, about 20 miles west, is too big for its britches: Somewhere around 100 people move there every day. I didn't experience this madness firsthand because I moved to New York in 1996. The changes hadn't bothered me much—or so I thought—until a few years ago, when I brought my husband to see where I grew up.

Sasha is from Odessa, Ukraine; his primary point of reference for the South was the movie *Doc Hollywood*, with Michael J. Fox as a snooty surgeon stranded in Grady, South Carolina, a fictional hamlet of art-directed county fairs and sun-dappled swimming holes. I knew the Mt. Juliet of my day had none of Grady's charm, that it was just some little nowhere place. But at least it was a place. Now when we drove down Mt. Juliet Road, my nowhere looked like everywhere else, like suburban Denver or Dubuque.

I felt like a fraud. Sasha had always thought of me as a girl from a rinky-dink town. More to the point, I had always thought of me as a girl from a rinky-dink town. It made my shortcomings less mortifying ("I'm just a girl from a

rinky-dink town...") and my achievements more triumphant ("I'm just a girl from a rinky-dink town!"). I liked being a person who had left Mt. Juliet. How dare Mt. Juliet leave me?

Then last fall my mother broke her ankle, and I went home five times in 12 months. The landscape just kept getting shinier and harder to ignore. So finally I decided that instead of just bellyaching about the place, I'd set out to really see it—find anything left from the past, get acquainted with what was new. It would be like living a country song, though I wasn't sure which one: "Ain't It Good to Be Back Home Again" or "The Good Old Days Are Gone"?

My mother, born in 1943, went to the same elementary school I did, back when the building held all 12 grades. Her father was Mt. Juliet's first police chief; one of her earliest memories is the sound of change jingling in his pocket when he put on his pants in the middle of the night to answer a call.

I asked her to show me her old stomping grounds, a request she couldn't have taken more seriously if I'd been Charles Kuralt. "This used to be McCorkle's Store," she said, cruising slowly past the park next to the new commuter-train station. "Behind it was Mr. Smith's worm ranch. You'd fill an ice cream container with worms and then go fishing."

She drove me to one tiny pocket of the old Mt. Juliet that still exists, like Brigadoon: little houses with porch swings and part-brick columns. It's where my mother grew up, in the days when she was just Betty Joyce.

She pointed out where everybody lived: Miss Iva Nell, who had drapes that pooled on the floor like bridal trains. ("That's why I like to have my curtains long.") The Bateses, who had the first TV in the neighborhood. The guy who cured her dog, Shep, of the mange. The preacher and his five daughters. Miss Carrie Cawthon and her cats.

This is not what small-town living ever meant to me. I grew up in a suburban split-level where we ate boxed mac and cheese. I went to ballet class in the next town over, watched hours of MTV, and was mesmerized by the worldly teacher who wasn't married to the father of her baby and asked whether we had ever seen *Hiroshima Mon*

The Thrill Is Gone

Who needs Disney World when you have Opryland USA? Alas, the beloved country music theme park was closed in 1997 to make way for the Opry Mills outlet mall.



Amour. The universe was out there, just beyond my reach, but I felt trapped in a black hole of church, football, and church services where people prayed about football. There was only one way for a woman to be, and that was tan.

I wanted to live in New York, the place I knew from magazines and movies, where people did complicated, exciting things like taking taxicabs to see their therapists. I never had my mother's fond Mt. Juliet memories—yet now it seemed I was the only one who cared that there was a CrossFit right down from a guns and ammo shop. My mother was completely unfazed. "Look how they've expanded the library," she said. "Did you see we have a cupcake place?"

She waved her hand at one of the larger houses, with a weathered gray barn behind. "A friend of your Uncle Nealon's lived there," she said. "They called him Corn."

"Catchy," I said, then felt sheepish when she smiled, fondly and unironically, and said, "Yeah, it is, isn't it?" I considered Corn and his wholesome, artless nickname. In his day, people didn't make things harder than they had to be. Maybe my generation took itself too seriously, and I should just eat a cupcake and get over myself.

Nashville used to be the Akron of the South, a midsize burg where the Smiths never played. These days it's living high on the hog. The economy is robust, the income tax puny, and tourism out of control. (Sometimes literally: It is one of the premiere bachelorette-party destinations in America.) The football stadium where the Tennessee Titans play sits next to the Cumberland River like the mother ship beamed down from space. Taylor Swift has a penthouse in one of the newer luxury high-rises. *Nashville*, a nighttime drama of sequins, secrets, and miscarriages faked with pig's blood, has been picked up for a fifth season.

When people in New York ask where my accent's from, I've always just said Nashville. It's easier, or at least it used to be. Now people say, "Oh! So fun!" Then they ask me what

they should do and see and eat there, or worse, tell me what I should do and see and eat there. It's irritating when some stranger explains my own city to me, especially because I suspect I'm not cool enough to live in it anymore.

Truthfully, I worked hard to be cool enough for Nashville even in its squareball days, when my friends and I dressed up in our thrift-store cocktail frocks and went to the Exit/In to hear bands play. The bouncer usually rejected our fake IDs, so we stood on the sidewalk with a rotating cast of wiry guitarists, Vanderbilt students, and kids from the more upscale Nashville high schools who never seemed to have curfews, unlike those of us who had to get up for Sunday school. I fretted that my "artsy" bobbed haircut was too Buster Brown, but I was out on the urban frontier! Rebellious, free, and blessedly unaware that I was standing in what would later be one of *Travel & Leisure's* top hipster cities.

Needing to see it to believe it, I took a drive through East Nashville, the hipster epicenter, a neighborhood where we used to lock our car doors. If Mt. Juliet had given itself over to brand-spanking-newness, East Nashville had hitched its wagon to vintage charm, of the sort beloved by those who adopt the olden days as a lifestyle brand. Simpkins Groceries, carefully and conspicuously restored, is now Any Old Iron, a boutique where you can pick up a Vivienne Westwood tote bag. Part of the old Fluffo mattress factory is now Fat Bottom Taproom & Beer Garden. I had to concede that the neighborhood had become a beautiful little place, and I shouldn't begrudge Haulin' Oats, the artisanal oatmeal boutique; after all, *somebody* had to preserve the past.

I stopped at Barista Parlor, a coffeehouse in what used to be a garage. But when I walked into that cavernous space filled with industrial pendant lamps and craggy plank tables, I forgot to roll my eyes. Because in that alien setting, I had a feeling at once so familiar and dear. The music, just for a second, sounded like the R.E.M. of my college-radio youth, and I could have been 16 again, out to explore the big city and hang with the alt kids, hoping to pass muster. Now I looked at all the man buns and tattoos and porkpie hats around me, and I was ever so slightly scornful. But I

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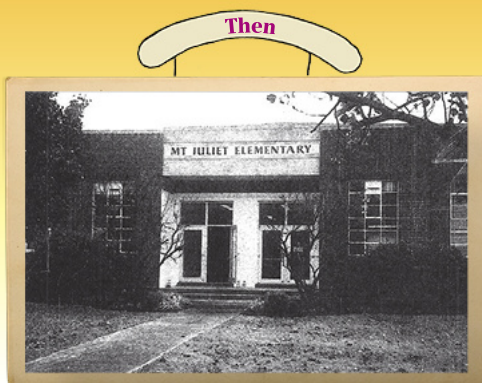


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Old School

Mt. Juliet Elementary used to be Mt. Juliet School, including all 12 grades. The building was demolished in 2006, and today the lot is home to stores and restaurants—like the Bar-B-Cutie of "Get your booty to Bar-B-Cutie" fame.





WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

KRISTEN KISH *chef, traveler*

Getting Fired Up

The Gallery, W Boston

AS A KID, I'D COME HOME from school, pull up a stool to the kitchen counter, and watch *Great Chefs of the World* on our tiny TV, completely tuned out, just observing the chefs' hands move with such confidence. One of the first things I made was "chocolate pudding," a mixture of stuff I found in the kitchen, including cornstarch and water. I used soy sauce to make it brown.

As I grew up, the kitchen was still my favorite place, but somehow I didn't get that cooking could be my career. I wanted what I thought I was supposed to want: marriage, a six-figure salary, the right car. I went to college to study business and even dated a football player, despite knowing deep down that I was gay. Eventually, I fell into a depression, and my mom sent me to therapy. Finally she said, "Why don't you try culinary school?" So I went, and when I started cutting a head of cabbage, the instructor said, "You've done this before. You're really good." It was an unbelievable feeling—total validation of the path I'd chosen.

I got a job as a line cook and worked my way through the ranks. In 2013, I won the tenth season of *Top Chef*, then ended up running the kitchen of Menton, one of the best restaurants in Boston. But even though my life looked shiny and wonderful, I still wasn't happy. So I navigated my way out of my comfort zone and "unemployed" myself. Now I'm writing a cookbook, traveling, cooking, and living out of a backpack. And I've never been happier.