

Chapter 1: The Beginning

May 14, 2026

I lost my job in June of 2020. It was COVID. University enrollment was down. Some dubious temporal reasoning was involved. I'm still not thrilled about it. That's a different story.

Despite the circumstances of my exit from Joplin, Missouri, it truly liberated me to pursue living in the city I had known for years I belong in. This isn't my love letter to New Orleans. That's also a different piece.

July and August, I spent some time wrapping up loose ends. September, I packed up my things. My brother came and drove my car. Everything made it back to Pensacola after a truly harrowing U-Haul experience (of my own making — mostly).

I stayed with my mom. That was never going to last long. My dad had been declining for years, so being close to him to “manage” his cycles of ER, skilled nursing facility, discharge, fall, ER, etc..., was at least helpful. September and October, I spent time running my stomping grounds. I went and stayed on the beach. I tried to finally learn to surf (didn't take). All this was leading toward what I truly wanted to do: finally go and live in New Orleans — if only temporarily.

For November and December, I rented a little cottage — a former butchery and detached garage (not at the same time, I presume) — in Bayou St. John. In that time, I did what we all do when on vacation: I Zillowed the place I was currently enjoying to see whether I could ever live here. Among the, I'm sure, dozen or so properties for sale that I saved, one was truly unique.

A dance studio. In a neighborhood I had not heard of (I entirely missed Lil Wayne's elevation of Hollygrove, evidently). How cool would this be? Look at the size of that dance floor. So much space! So many possibilities! A pommel horse! I saved it and didn't think much of it beyond that.

I got a job in Niceville, FL, starting in January. It was a sensible decision to be an hour away from Pensacola in the event my dad needed anything. MLK day was Monday January 18th. My first day was Tuesday, January 19th. My dad died Wednesday, January 20th. It's a disservice (well, not entirely) to muse that he just didn't want to see Joe Biden inaugurated.

My third day of work was the beginning of my bereavement leave. The next two weeks were funeral preparation and peddling the long and short form death certificate all over town. An aside, turns out a death certificate is like a skeleton key into anyone's life. Very interesting. I returned to work, now effectively tasked with two jobs. 1) Senior Data Analyst at Northwest Florida State College and 2) the administrator of my dad's estate.

Lying in bed in my rented Niceville house that February, mindlessly Zillowing, this dance studio reappeared — no alert, just there on my saved list where it hadn't been before. I guess it had gone off and back on the market. Backed by some inheritance funds, the prospect of buying this place seemed suddenly not so absurd.

I got in touch with Bridget Crane, a high school friend who I knew simultaneously held both love for the city and an objective realism about the pitfalls of New Orleans. She was able

to get me in touch with a realtor. And after work one evening, I made the four-hour drive from Niceville to Hollygrove to meet Bridget and the realtor, in the dark, in a neighborhood people regularly described to me as “Oh, Hollygrove. It’s uh, really up-and-coming...”

The realtor opened the door. Surprisingly, it had power! The lights came on. A 20” x 40” open kitchen and entertaining space? A pool table? BANDS!?!?

And upstairs — the ghosts of a dance studio. Much worse shape. Gymnastics equipment strewn around. What’s the creepy freezer doing here? Surely there’s not a body in it..., right? Man, I hope someone could use this pommel horse.

I was in love.

It was in terrible shape. Broken windows. Rotted doors. Didn’t smell particularly nice. Something going on in the walls that we’ll get to in a later entry. I left New Orleans around 9 or 10 and made the four-hour trek back to Niceville for work the next day. I didn’t tell anyone. Only Bridget and the realtor knew. My family, coworkers, bosses — not yet.

When I did describe this to my family, to their credit, they did their best to introduce the possibility that this might not be a wise endeavor. They knew they weren’t going to talk me out of it though.

My offer included splitting an even donation to a dance non-profit between buyer and seller, reducing the sale price by that amount — a way to honor what the building had been. The sellers rejected it outright and closed with someone else. That deal fell through (more foreshadowing). I paid full ask — because I’m a terrible negotiator — closing on Friday, May 28th, 2021.

I flew my best Joplin friend down to be a part of this. I’m sure I’ve told Becca many times how much that meant to me. And if not, I certainly repaid her with her first Buc-ee’s experience — one giant, glacial lap around the Robertsdale location because we didn’t account for how busy it would be over Memorial Day weekend to actually stop and go in. My mom and cousin would join us later in New Orleans.

I initiated the wire transfer. We got to the broker. They pressured us to eat the freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. I signed everything. Becca took pictures. I got the keys. And we drove to the property to see the bemusement on my mother’s face when she laid eyes on it for the first time. I walked her through it. This would be a monster bathroom. and bedroom. and closet! Although, to her credit, having resolved herself to the fact that there was no stopping this, she began to at least acknowledge that while it wasn’t apparent to her, she understood that I had a vision for this space. No plan, but a vision.

What’s next in part two, you ask? Oh, boy. Eight-hour round trip weekends. Looking for a job. Quitting a job. A hurricane. TERMITES! Stay tuned!