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The Misadventures of An Amateur Traveler

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Foreword

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I've always been a fearlessly independent person. Fearlessness and independence are usually desirable qualities; when it comes to travel, however, they have oft landed me in very undesirable situations. Because I care for the civilians of this fine planet, I conglomerated all of my mistakes. I'm sure that begs the question, "Why would we care about your mistakes, Catherine?" Well, my friend so they know not to do the things that I have done. As I amassed the laundry list of my stupid shenanigans, it formed into something I can only describe as an "anti-travel guide." Based on my very personal mishaps *ehem* *experiences*, I have tips on what NOT to do when traveling. Here are five tips to make sure you get from Point A to Point B without a hitch, and without having to hitchhike.

Now, let me make a disclaimer. My travel experiences are the farthest thing from glamorous. This is not a travel guide in the traditional sense. These are not stories of my fabulous trips to exotic locales. The most "exotic" place I've been to is Yellowstone National Park. To make that even more unglamorous, it was a * gag * *family* vacation. Instead, these traveling fiascos are typically stories of me trying to make it out in the big scary world, only to fall flat on my metaphorical face into metaphorical bitter asphalt. Alas, I've lived to tell my tales and that is exactly what I'll do. So with that in mind, I

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present to you *Catherine Livingston's Foolproof Guide to Unglamorous Travel*.

Five tips for an Amateur Traveler, from an Amateur Traveler

TIP #1: Beware of the bamboozlers, bandits, and bad guys.

TIP #2: Give yourself ample time to get to your destination.

TIP #3: Double, triple and quadruple check the date and time of your scheduled transportation.

TIP #4: Make sure you know which direction your transportation is taking you before you board.

TIP #5: Don't run red lights.

Chapter 1: The Flyaway Duffel Bags

Tip #1: Beware off the bamboozlers, bandits, and bad guys.

"SNAP." "WHOOSH." "THUD."

"What the hell was that?" said my Dad (in honesty, he didn't use the word "hell" but I figured the scene called for some censorship).

The sound came from on top of the car. Through the back window we see the two duffel bags that had fallen off the roof of our car lay helplessly in between the dotted white lines. They grow smaller and smaller, as our 2003 Honda Pilot whizzes down the freeway.

There were too many cars and we were going too fast to stop on the side of the road and retrieve the suitcases. My dad veered off the highway at the next exit and circled around in attempt to find the spot where we'd lost the suitcases.

We drive and drive in search, only the bags are nowhere to be found. We pull off to the side to Assess the sunk costs.

Of course. My duffel bag was gone.

My family and I were about two hours into the drive on our way to Martha's Vineyard. It was the first day of my favorite week of the year. Ever since I was a child my family and I vacation in Edgartown Martha's Vineyard for a week in August. We spend the whole week with my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and

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cousins on the beach eating rich lobster rolls and drinking cold bottles of Coca Cola. It's spectacular.

I've been to Martha's Vineyard twenty times now. I still get just as excited as I did when I was 6. Nothing could ruin my favorite week of the year.

Or so I'd thought.

Captain Dad (not dissimilar to the iconic image of Captain Underpants), spurred into action after we discovered that the duffel bags were missing from where they fell off the roof of the car.



This is Captain Underpants, for those of you unfamiliar

As a District Attorney, he used his connections to get in touch with the State troopers. They reviewed the surveillance video of the highway and discovered that two men had pulled to the side of the highway after spotting our abandoned luggage. They proceeded to DODGE in front of the busy highway traffic to snatch our bags from the road. I'll confirm your suspicions:

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they were not good Samaritans risking their lives in dangerous highway traffic to return the bags to their rightful owners. They were a couple of parasitic bamboozlers that lunged at an opportunity to steal a fourteen year-old girl's wardrobe. I never saw that duffel bag again. I hope the river of tears I cried over losing all my clothes was worth the American Eagle apparel and Claire's earrings, ya scumbags.

Lesson learned: not everyone you come across in your travels is trustworthy. As a young woman travelling alone, I've learned to be on my guard at all moments. Like the bamboozlers that stole my bag, some people—not everyone—have ruthless spirits and hearts of tar. I'm not advising a life of cynicism and pessimism, but keep a watchful eye and always protect yourself.

Chapter 2: Midtown Mayhem

Tip #2: Give yourself ample time to get to your destination.

Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed is no way to go through life, son.

I had an internship this summer with Elle Magazine in midtown Manhattan. I repeat, Manhattan: the commuter mecca of the world. I'm not the *smoothest* commuter (to put it euphemistically). Every day I would take the 7:31 train into Grand Central from Harrison's station. From Grand Central I took the subway: the Times Square Shuttle and then the 1 uptown to Van Cortlandt Park, emerging street side at 59th St Columbus Circle. I'm able to recite this for you now because my route had been engrained into the most subconscious of my mental levels. Any fool can commute the same route every day; the tricky part is navigating yourself in new waters. My New York route hadn't always been second nature. The first time I made the trek, I may or may not have ended up in Harlem, but that's a story for another time.

The internship was a great learning experience. It consisted of a lot of informal, field experience: both in and out of the office. One day, I got a healthy dose of "out-of-office field experience." The Special Events Director asked for an intern to go on a little adventure. Bright eyed and bushy tailed, I volunteered for the "fun" adventure. The task was to

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venture down to Broad Street, in the financial district, and pick up an iPad. "An iPad you say, Catherine?" Yes, a singular iPad. Elle was hosting an event for the women featured in their "Women in Technology" editorial. This iPad was a prototype for the iPad menus that would grace the tables at this swanky event.

My co-intern, Nikki and I hailed a cab and rode down to Broad Street—that was the easy part. We picked up the iPad with no trouble, smooth sailing, right?

Wrong.

Nikki and I spent the next ten minutes outside the building trying to hail another cab, except there were none to be found. We stood on distant street corners, each independently trying to flag a ride down. Finally we caught one and were ready to be back on our way to the office. Only one problem:

Rush hour.

We sat in the heavy heat and stench of Manhattan cross expressway. Our cab driver jerked and swerved and lunged the car through traffic. The only thing worse than standstill traffic is a cab driver who thinks he can weave in and out of lanes like Jason Bourne. Nikki and I were getting impatient and I felt queasy. Seeing no end in sight to this traffic, Nikki and I decide to jump ship and find the nearest subway. We pay for the cab, and to the annoyance of our driver, ditch the horrific traffic in search of an uptown subway station.

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Where would a millennial be without her smart phone? Lost in the middle of Manhattan, that's where. I open an app that directs us to the nearest subway: it's three avenues away. Three doesn't sound like a lot, but in New York, avenues are much longer than streets and I was wearing heels. We sweat our way up the avenues, racing against the clock. Nikki had a job interview at 5:30 and I needed to catch a train home because I had to babysit. We finally reach the subway station and wait underground for 10 minutes until the subway comes. The subway comes and we hop on. Nikki and I both stand on the subway, clutching the pole and swaying with the jostling of the subway car. She hops off a stop earlier than me to race to her interview. I'm stuck with the task of going back to Hearst Tower to give the iPad to the Special Events Director. I finally make it to Columbus Circle and head towards Hearst. I swipe my security card and ride the escalator that leads to the elevator. Then take the elevator to the 24th floor, place the iPad on the director's desk, grab my bag and rush back downstairs.

I really had to hustle. The last train that would get me home on time was departing in 15 minutes and I still needed to catch the downtown 1, transfer, and ride the shuttle to GCT. I dodged through the hot, crowded platforms and leapt through closing subway doors. I shuffled as best I could in my heels through the concourses of Grand Central Terminal. My train was

on track 21, the lower deck. I make it to my track and see my train still waiting, the doors open.

I MADE IT HAHA!

I hurry down the stairs and as approach the train, I see the doors begin to close. If this were a movie, this scene would be in slow motion, my eyes would slowly widen into a look of panic as I rushed towards the closing doors. In a moronic moment of instinct, I lunge forward and shove my arm in between the closing doors. I think I figured it would have a sensor like most elevator doors, and open back up after my hand was thrust between the doors. Alas, it was not motion-activated. My arm was now stuck between the train's doors. People on the inside of the train stared with indifference. Jaded New Yorkers thinking, "Eh, I've seen stranger things." One man didn't both to pick his head up from *The Financial Times*: I suppose the latest statistics on China's GDP were more pressing than a panicked young girl whose arm was about to be severed by a departing train.

I'm exaggerating, my arm wasn't actually stuck, I could've pulled it out. However, I refused to give up on this train. I take my street cred as a babysitter very seriously, and I didn't want Mrs. Smith telling Mrs. Truman at soccer practice that I showed up late to watch the kids. I stubbornly kept my arm in between those doors, and even tried prying the doors open. The prying did nothing, but moments later, the doors opened up again

and I boarded the train in exhausted victory.

I was sweating an embarrassing amount and the train doors had left the sleeve of my white blouse stained with black grease, but I was relieved to have made it on that train with all my limbs in tact.

Lesson learned: Sometimes you will run into unforeseen circumstances. The best preparation for the unknown when traveling is giving yourself plenty of time to work through the kinks or switch over to Plan B. Just stay calm and find a solution and you'll get where you need to go.

Chapter 3: Not So Ready for Take-Off

Tip #3: Double, triple and quadruple check the date and time of your scheduled transportation.

The date is September 10, 2014. I can remember that specific date because I have an Orbitz Flight Confirmation email in my inbox to validate my memory. I was flying home for the weekend to see my little brother play in his senior homecoming football game. I know, I'm such a good big sister. But guys! That's not the point of the story, quit distracting me you rascals!

I was scheduled to fly home Friday evening and fly back Sunday afternoon. I finished my last class on Friday at 4pm and went back to my dorm to pack for my flight. I was taking my time packing because I didn't need to leave until 7ish for my 9:35pm flight. Anyways, I'm packing and cleaning and straightening my room up so I can come back to a made-bed and clear desk. I finish packing and before I go to eat dinner, I decide to print my boarding pass. La-dee-da, I whistle jauntily on my way to the printers. I log into the computer, pull up my email, open the flight confirmation and

OH.

MY.

GOD.

WHAT IS THIS? THIS SAYS MY FLIGHT IS FOR 7:40pm. I THOUGHT MY

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FLIGHT WAS AT 9:35PM.

Wait, what time is it, maybe it's not too late!

It's 6:20...

LORD HAVE MERCY ON MY SOUL.

Let's make we're on the same page here. I want you to understand the scope of improbability I'm facing.

If you're lucky and score a cab driver with a lead foot, it takes maybe 35 minutes to get from Michigan's central campus to McNamara Terminal of DTW. More often it takes about 40 minutes or so. So even if I had a cab driver waiting outside for me at that very moment, I would be *arriving* at the airport when my plane was schedule to board.

ARRIVING.

Now, that does not account for the time I have to wait for someone to drive me to the airport. Then after arriving, I would have to wait in line to have my boarding pass and license verified. Go through TSA. With my luck I'll probably be behind a grandma wearing shoes with laces and a belt with a buckle made

of a Rubik's cube. And find my gate in the vast stretches of Detroit Metropolitan Airport.

I had to try to make it. That's when I charged into something I like to call "turbo mode." This happens when my body is flooded with so much unbridled anxiety that my memory is blocked and I lose peripheral vision and I start to smell sounds and hear other people's thoughts. Just kidding, I think I just described spider-man, not sure though. Anyways, I did feel a knot form in the depth of my abdomen. The knot that only forms once I realize I have an impossible task before me. But I had to try.

I whipped out my phone and pulled open my Uber app. The wait-time for a car was 5 minutes: not bad. I requested the Uber, printed out my boarding pass, raced to the elevator and to my room to grab my suitcase and jacket. Luckily I had everything packed and ready to go. I went back downstairs and soon my Uber was arriving. I hopped across the traffic and clambered into my Uber.

"I'm running late and my flight departs in 40 minutes, please do anything you can to get me to the airport as fast as possible."

Some of you might be skeptical as to whether or not I actually said that. I'm not sure if I said those exact words, but I definitely panted something to the effect of "holy shit buddy,

push that pedal to the medal baby, we got ourselves a crisis" He was accommodating to my stressful situation and sped a little faster than he was supposed to and maybe squeezed a yellow light here and there, and for that I was truly appreciative.

I got to the airport around 7:00, the very time my flight was supposed to be boarding. I clumsily sprung out of the car and stormed into the airport.

I got in the security line. Waited until it was my turn to present my boarding pass and driver's license. The TSA agent marked my pass with highlighter and shooed me ahead. I grabbed the bins and whipped off my shoes. I shimmied my jacket down my shoulders, crumpled it and shoved it into the bin. One of the biggest pains of security is they require your laptop to be removed from your baggage and put in its own bin. So I agilely slipped my laptop from my backpack and put the laptop in its own bin. I lifted my carry on and my backpack onto the conveyor belt, pushed my two bins and two bags through the x-ray scanner. Waited to be told to enter the human scanner. Entered scanner, hands up, scan, waited three seconds. Exit scanner. Waited for security to give me the go-ahead. Okay good to go. Collected my suitcase, put laptop back into my backpack, shoved my feet violently into my shoes, grabbed my coat, swung my bag pack over my shoulder and pulled my rolling suitcase behind me.

Next phase of mission impossible: get to my gate. My gate was

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A-72 out of A-78. In other words, I needed to travel down the entire concourse, which, according to the airport's official website, is half a mile long. Luckily the architects of Detroit Metropolitan Airport were thinking of me when they included an "Express Tram" in the airport's design. It's a shuttle that speeds you down the concourse. I climbed up the escalator to catch the tram, and waited a few minutes for the tram to arrive. Checking my watch furiously, it was about 7:15 and I was praying my plane was still boarding. The Express Tram glided in and comes to a halt, I climbed in. The tram glided back down the concourse and came to another halt. I rushed out and down the escalator to hear my gate agent announce zone 2 is beginning to board.

I made it...and with time to spare.

Lesson learned: Always be prepared. Traveling is often a stressful experience: but the more prepared you are and the more time you have, the less stressed you'll be. So make lists, check and re-check your information, and give yourself plenty of time to make sure everything is set and ready to go.

Chapter 4: Thank You, Dolores.

Tip #4: Make sure you know which direction your transportation is taking you before you board.

A thing about me that you should know: I love to shop. So one fine Ann Arbor day, two of my friends and I decided to go to the Briarwood Mall. The Briarwood Mall is a typical shopping mall and it's about a 10-minute drive from The University of Michigan's central campus. Without a car, Locket, Anna and I decided to make use of the oh-so convenient Ann Arbor bus system, The Ride. We picked up the Route 4 Washtenaw bus and made it safely to the mall. (I apologize for the excruciating pace of this story. But stay with me, it gets better). We shop around and eventually leave the mall with perfect timing. As we exit, our bus is rolling towards us in the distance. The bus comes to a halt and we board, swipe our passes and make our way to available seats. We ride along for a little while and eventually notice that we aren't going towards campus, in fact we are traveling in the very opposite direction of our desired destination. From the back of the bus, we can only vaguely hear the driver saying something about going in the wrong direction. So we think to ourselves: "Phew, okay, she's made a mistake, not us." Now we are under the impression that the bus driver will

momentarily turn around and head towards Ann Arbor.

We wait.

Then we wait some more.

After a couple of miles we realize that the bus driver has no intentions of turning around. Our confusion turns into panic. We don't know what's happening and more importantly, we don't know what to do. In a desperate moment we agree that we should get off the bus.

As we climb down the steep stairs, the shining beacon that is Ypsilanti, Michigan greets us. (For those of you unfamiliar with the towns of Michigan, that was sarcasm. Ypsilanti is scarier than those "mustaches" that are only creepy strands of scraggly attempted facial hair on an upper lip.) In front of us is an abandoned lot. Yellowed grass sprouts from schisms in the asphalt. Shards of opaque liquor bottles are scattered around us. There are a few neglected shops, some of which have been completely abandoned.

We have to figure out how to get home. There's no way for us to know when a bus will come by the stop to take us home. We decide to call for an Uber. At first, my Uber app tells me there are no cars currently available. Great. Perfect. Dandy. But, after a while of refreshing the app, I'm finally able to catch one. Our driver, Dolores, will arrive in fifteen minutes. Okay

not bad. At least now there is light at the end of this 15 minute-long tunnel, right? [nervous laughter].

So now we are waiting out this storm until Dolores arrives. We must have been a spectacle: three young ladies, brightly colored shopping bags in hand, huddled together on the side of the road, checking over our shoulders. Where we stood was adjacent to a stoplight, so cars would pull up alongside us and stop, waiting for the light to turn green. (Wise Guy: "Wow Catherine, tell me again how stoplights work!!!" All right, Wise Guy, why don't you just pipe down and let me finish this story so these nice people can go home and watch The Wheel of Fortune.) As I was saying, we were standing next to a stoplight and as cars were halted next to us, the drivers watched us. I had my head down to avoid exposing the vulnerability in my eyes. As I had my head down I hear a booming CRASH. My friend had seen the whole thing. A man had rolled up to the stoplight in a crappy 1998 Subaru. His neck was craned completely, staring at us so intently that he CRASHES HIS CAR into the car in front of him. At first I was only confused as to the origin of that god-awful noise. Now that I had found out that we caused a car crash I wanted out. Before it was just an uncomfortable feeling of being watched. Now we had very strong proof that it was very obvious we didn't belong in this situation. The drivers got out of their cars to inspect the damage. They must've concluded that

there wasn't enough damage for it to be worth calling the police, so they just got back into their vehicles and drove away.

We're still on the side of the road by the bus stop waiting for our Uber. As if the situation couldn't get worse, my phone dies. Now there was no way for us to know how far away Dolores was. Nor was there any way for her to contact me in case she couldn't find us. So at this point all we could do was wait it out and hope our Uber shows up.

We're waiting and in the mean time another bus pulls up headed in the same direction our bus was headed before. A heavysset woman in her fifties wobbles down the bus stairs, a few old plastic bags in hand. She sees us waiting there and as her bus pulls away, she asks us "You ladies doin' okay?"

"Yes, thank you, we're alright." I reply respectfully.

"Okay, because I'm a momma and I wouldn't want to see my babies waitin' alone here for too long. The sun is about to go down and I don't think y'all should be stayin' here much longer."

"Absolutely ma'am, thank you. We're just waiting for a cab to come pick us up."

"Okay good," she says as she continues to walk away. "I don't mean to scare, but I know that just over there someone was killed. Shot, right behind that building. So just don't stay out

here once it gets dark, ya hear?"

"Yes ma'am thank you."

She turns her back and Anna Locket and I all look at each other. I don't think any of us said actual words at first. It was a tacit understanding: our mouths agape, eyes widened incredulously. Did we just hear what we think we heard? Are we standing literally *yards* away from where a dead body used to lie? Not okay. NOT okay.

This situation used to be a mere inconvenience and I just wanted to be home.

Now?

Now I'm scared for my life. My phone is dead and I don't know when the Uber is coming and we are going to die.

Oh God. This is how I'll go isn't it?

I can picture my corpse now: lying on the ground, clutching a Victoria's Secret bag in one hand and a LOFT bag in the other. Goodbye world. I squandered my time with you and I'm sorry.

So it turns out I was overreacting a little. Because minutes later our Uber pulls into the glass-strewn lot and we climb in. I had to double check it wasn't a mirage. I felt like Tom Hanks in *Cast Away* when he is finally found by a passing cargo ship. We had been rescued and the anxiety had yet to subside into elation, but I was relieved to be moving in the direction of safety. Thank you Dolores, you're my guardian angel

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and now I pray to you every night.

Lesson learned: Don't be afraid to ask for help: bus drivers, airport security, police officers, train conductors etc. will be happy to help point you in the right direction. It's better to ask for help than it is to end up mere yards away from a retired murder scene.

Chapter 5: A Learner's Curve

Tip #5: Don't run red lights.

The January streets of Rye, New York are lined with dirtied snow. I ask my mom to take me driving, so I could practice parallel parking. It's 2012 and I'm 16, which means I have my learner's permit. By New York law, I'm required to have a licensed driver in the car with me. It's the day before my roads test, but I'm not nervous. I've got my usual unwarranted confidence about me, the same unwarranted confidence I carry with everything I do.

Side note: I blame my grandfathers for this ego. My dad's dad always exclaims "Hi ya, gorgeous! You look *beautiful!*" Every time I see him, without fail. He lights up when I walk into the room and he doesn't do that for my other 4 girl cousins. He pokes fun at my idiot brothers and always rushes to my defense when they pick on me. My other grandfather, my mom's dad, calls me "the good one." Being the oldest girl of my 11 cousins, he comes to me first for help and is always impressed with my competence. He marvels at schoolwork of mine that my mom sends him (without my permission). Yes, obviously, my grandfathers are biased. But their effusive compliments make me feel like I'm the most special girl in the world, and for that reason, I do everything with a confidence teetering on arrogance. But I try to stay on the self-respect side of the spectrum as opposed to the egomaniac side...I try.

Anyways, back to the story. I didn't so much ask, as I did holler. "Mom!" I bellowed from the next room over, "Can you take me driving!?" My mom always lets me drive, my dad never does. I'm not a believer in horoscopes; I think the predictions are a bunch of phooey. I do, however, believe in signs. My dad is an Aries, a ram, and I'm a Taurus, the bull. We often grapple for power, horns to horns: our hooves dug firmly into the ground, neither of us relenting to the other. Because the Aries never let me drive, I always asked the Aquarius when I wanted practice.

We climb into "Molly." The name we had for my mom's Ford 500. She was a plain and sturdy, light silver, four-door sedan. She exuded the vibes of a "Molly:" dependable, no nonsense, timeless, unexciting but loveable. Her interior was a dull gray microfiber, no swanky leather or polished wood panels. She was the car version of everyone's first cell phone: the baseline gray, chunky flip-phone. Behind the steering wheel, I stick the keys into the ignition and turn them away from me. The car grumbles into submission and heat pours out from the vents. I turn the wheel away from the curb and I hear the crunching of snow underneath the tires. I drive slowly and carefully through our neighborhood, and turn right onto Boston Post Road.

Up ahead there's a bend in the road. I know there is a stop light beyond the bend because I've driven on this road countless times before. But to people unfamiliar with the road, the stoplight isn't visible until you're fairly close to it. The "surprise element" of this stoplight usually isn't an issue because it's almost always green.

Almost always.

I suppose I had become accustomed to the frequency of green at the stoplight. Because that one January afternoon when my mom and I were driving to practice some parallel parking, I just kept driving through the light, without noticing the light was red.

I should be grateful. I could've crashed into another car or gotten pulled over by a police officer. But luckily, no one got hurt and no sirens began to blare. Although the sound I next heard came eerily close to a siren.

"CATHERINE LOUISE." My mom blurted. "You just completely ignored that red light!"

I honestly had no idea the light was red. I was focused on something else and completely neglected to see the light wasn't green.

"Oh my god, mom I totally didn't see it!" My words didn't help.

"That's it!" she exclaims, infuriated. "No way you're ready to take this roads test tomorrow, I won't let you."

I must've uttered the classic, "BUT mom!" or something along those lines, I don't quite remember. I hadn't even gotten to try parallel parking. I pleaded for her to let me keep driving for now: I reasoned profusely that "we're already out and not many cars are on the road!" and "I really need the practice!" and "Daddy never takes me driving!" and "the DMV can only schedule a roads test months in advance!" and "am I supposed to have you drive me around forever?"

I think that last one convinced her. There was no visible shudder, but the idea of being a chauffeur for the next six months was the last thing she wanted.

She acquiesced, reluctantly, and let me keep driving. We practiced parallel parking in our neighborhood and drove around town for a while, making futile turns, all the while I was vigilantly breaking earlier than I needed to for stop signs and driving five miles below the speed limit.

The next day I took my roads test. In New York, you can be deducted by a maximum amount of 30 points and still pass the driver's test. I was deducted by exactly thirty points which *meeeeannntttt* that I was finally licensed!

After the test I climbed back into the car and exclaimed that I had passed and showed my mom the interim license. She

mumbled that she had a feeling I would pass. She was still irked at my carelessness yesterday and doubtful that I was actually ready to be licensed. I knew that behind her displeasure was relief that I could be independent, and the relief was mutual.

Lesson learned: Mistakes will happen: sometimes the only way to learn is by firsthand error. Oh, and try not to run any red lights, even if it is on accident and even if no one gets hurt.

Conclusion

Well, these were the stories I wanted to tell. There are more, but in respect for your time I will hold off. In the least, I hope you found the ones I did tell amusing. I fully understand if you refuse to take advice from someone like me. But, if you ever end up with your arm caught in a train's doors or standing amidst broken liquor bottles in an abandoned lot, I'll have no choice but to say, "I told you so." Good luck on all of your traveling endeavors, and non-traveling endeavors for that matter. Just remember that you don't need a five star hotel or a private beach to create shareable stories.