

Bumping Into Ghosts
by Melanie Biehle
for [The Equals Project Volume I: Exploration](#)

Walking through the same neighborhoods, stepping inside the same shops, eating breakfast while looking out the same window I looked through 14 years earlier with very different eyes, sometimes I see her. The wide-eyed 30 year-old who was so happy to be in Seattle, finally. The starry-eyed 34 year-old who answered Hollywood's call. The troubled 36 year-old, reckless and lost, licking her wounds in all the wrong ways. The childless 39 year-old holding hands in the summer sunshine with her one true love.

The four of us had such different lives, even though we're tied together as one. Every step, every moment, leading up to the next version. Walking around the corner and into the future.

I've lived in Seattle four times now. It was a city I dreamed about from my small Louisiana hometown since 1991, right after *Nevermind* was released and a year before I saw *Singles*. I'd never even visited, not even close, but I knew that it was the place for me.

The first time I moved to Seattle was July 1999, eight years after I vowed I would. I was married to my first husband and we'd been living in the suburbs of Atlanta for about a year and a half, the only other place I'd ever lived besides Louisiana. When I saw a job listing for a psychiatric clinical research position in the Pacific Northwest I jumped on it, thinking there's no way they would hire someone out of state. But they did. They flew me out for an interview and I got the job. Finally, I was moving to Seattle!

Everything was new and exciting. I remember the first time I saw Mt. Rainier, how blue the skies were and what it felt like to wear a jacket in August. I loved walking downtown from my First Hill apartment, even if I got creeped out when I had to walk underneath I-5. When we moved into our first Capitol Hill apartment it got even better. I loved my artsy, vibrant neighborhood that called for a people-watching game on Halloween - Normal Clothes or Halloween Costume?

I found a new job and new friends in January 2000, when everyone decided they had to work for companies named "dotcom." We were market researchers on the Seattle technology playground. We wore shorts and brought dogs to work like the rest of the cool kids. We took long lunch hours and went for boat rides on Lake Washington. Smooth sailing.

Looking out over the lake a few years later, I see her. The happy woman having drinks at the bar right below her office with her gaggle of guy friends. Feeling at home in Seattle, the place she knew she wanted to be, before the dotcoms turned into dotbombs and the frenetic seeking began.

I was laid off from my sinking ship on September 10, 2001. Yes. Seriously.

At that point I started questioning my life and ended up back in Louisiana for a long 10 months. When I got back to Seattle I was grateful. Even though I was living in the same neighborhood, just steps away from my old apartment, I rediscovered the city I'd come to know as my home. This time through brand new eyes.

My then-husband joined me in Seattle six months later, after he finished his Masters program. By that time I had my own routine and had become obsessed with writing, screenwriting in particular. And everyone who knew anything about screenwriting knew one thing to be true. If you want to make it as a screenwriter, you have to move to Los Angeles.

The screenwriting bug bit me hard, sinking his sharp teeth in and gripping my pale skin, and refused to budge. I knew that I had to jump from the overcast walls of technology into the land of sunshine and dreams. We packed up our belongings again, my husband (understandably) begrudgingly, and I said goodbye to that version of me and the one before her and headed south.

Sometimes I see her when I cut through Barnes & Noble after I leave the parking garage. She's studying *Filmmaker Magazine* and Los Angeles guidebooks with a furrowed brow. She's alone, used to doing things on her own, even though she's legally part of a couple. She's restless and looking for direction. I want to smooth her hair and tell her that everything will be all right. Eventually.

November 2003 - West Hollywood, California. I swam outside in November and had a picnic on the beach. I wore sunglasses every day, made new friends, and built a life, but never felt at home. I invented a new career for myself and created new ghosts. I optioned my romantic comedy screenplay, worked my butt off marketing other people's bad movies, and blamed Los Angeles for the demise of my marriage. I became a person I barely recognized - an impatient shopaholic with a sense of entitlement.

So I did what I always did - decided it was time to move back to Seattle. My safe place. I had planned to go with my husband and try gluing the sharp pieces of our broken relationship back together again, but this time he had his own plans for where he was going next. I spent my last night in L.A. in my empty Miracle Mile apartment eating pizza and watching *Breakfast at Tiffany's* on a tiny laptop screen.

December 31, 2005. New Year's Eve. I'm back in Seattle, this time alone.

January 1, 2006. I walk outside and watch the fireworks light up the Space Needle and the eyes of the loving couples surrounding me. Happy New Year. I am a complete wreck.

The city felt spoiled. Two of my former apartment buildings and the one I just moved into were all on the same street, and I'd only lived in one of them alone. I kept bumping into the happy woman from five years before every time I went to my favorite coffee shop or picked up my dry cleaning. I'd turn a corner and feel her ghost pass through me - the woman I was before I knew how to write a screenplay, before I lived in three different Los Angeles apartments and owned a chair that cost twice my rent.

Questions I asked myself: How did I reach the age of 36 without ever living alone? Have I wasted the last 10 years of my life? Am I going to be a cat lady? Who am I and what do I even want anymore?

Statements that I told myself: I will never get married again. I will never open myself up that wide. I will never be happy again. I have to get out of here. I have to move back to Los Angeles.

When I see this broken ghost my heart tries to reach out and hold her. She stands outside the very first apartment she ever had all to herself. Pacing and smoking, glued to her BlackBerry, her head swirling with toxic thoughts. She is completely lost.

June 2007 - West Hollywood, California. Shaky, but mostly sure. Ready to move on and start living my life again, but occasionally brushing shoulders with the miserable version of me when I walk to my desk in the same office building with the same people I worked with two years before. Less often I see the unjaded L.A. newcomer trying to navigate her way through the sprawling city, still believing it's all worth it.

This new version of me wishes for opportunities, toys with the idea of falling in love, and dares to think about "forever." She meets the person she would soon fall

completely and madly in love with, like nothing she had ever experienced before. Then it starts. She hates her job. Hates Los Angeles. Hates the lifestyle at the very same time she starts to love her life. Feels the need to slow down. Knows that it's time to go.

October 2008. I'm living in Seattle again, this time with my soon-to-be fiancé. In two years, my husband and two-month-old son and I walk around the city where so many versions of me lived before. In four years my two-year-old son plays on a playground next to the path that his distraught mother trudged along six years before.

Even though I'm happier and more grounded than I've ever been, I still see her. When I'm sitting next to my son, across the table from the man that I love, in the pizza place where I had my very first meal when I arrived in Seattle in 1999. When I duck into a Capitol Hill coffee shop for a latte, she's having a lively conversation with a man she just met. I watch her try to find her footing while she stumbles up a sidewalk, leaning on a distraction. I look up at the windows of her old bedroom and it feels like 100 years have passed.

Sometimes I see her breeze by carrying a yoga mat. I catch a glimpse of her on an escalator. I think that was her trying on clothes at Anthropologie. She passes by too fast for me to recognize which one of her I saw. Sometimes when I see her I say a silent, "thank you" - for creating, walking, and living the winding paths that made me "me."

Melanie Biehle
March 31, 2013

Twitter: [@melaniebiehle](https://twitter.com/melaniebiehle)

Instagram: [@melanie_biehle](https://www.instagram.com/melanie_biehle)

Web: www.melaniebiehle.com