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Borders, Baggage, and Bravery

I caught the travel bug early—and the motion sickness, too. Growing up, my world was defined by constant movement. When my mother moved us from **Chicago** to **Iowa**, we never actually stayed still; we were always on the road back to **Illinois**, up to **Minnesota** to visit family, or pulling into tiny towns where my mom competed in poetry slams. My sister and I became her dedicated road crew. Somewhere between gas station snacks and state-line photos, I fell in love with the art of leaving home. As a young Black girl, movement felt like magic, and the horizon held nothing but promise.

But the world has a way of complicating a Black girl's joy. The transition from carefree wandering to the sharp realities of womanhood began when I left home for college in **Mason City, Iowa**. Two hours from my mother, I found myself a young Black woman in a predominantly white town, receiving an unprompted, unwanted education in American racism. I will never forget the day a Burger King cashier looked at my friends and me and told us to pick up our food “around the back.” I walked out hungry. My mother didn't raise me to beg for a side of disrespect.

That was the defining threshold. The world was telling me how it saw me, forcing me to grow up in an instant. My girlhood innocence broke, and my womanhood took its place—defined by a refusal to accept indignity.

As I kept moving, the lessons

only deepened. When we relocated to **Arizona**, a cross-country adventure turned into a jarring history lesson when a retail customer asked if the “little colored girl” could help her. I was stunned to hear words I thought only existed in old documentaries targeted directly at me. It wasn't my first encounter with hate—in the sixth grade, I had faced the N-word from a classmate and fought back, learning early that defending your dignity doesn't earn you extra credit in this world. But as an adult woman navigating the workforce, the sting was different. It required a deeper, quieter strength.

My addiction to geography took me across nine states and into more than a dozen countries. In **Wisconsin**, college life was shadowed by a campus death threat against Black students and landlords who openly admitted they were “uncomfortable” renting to Black people. In **Northern California**, I escaped overt racism only to collide with colorism, learning how the world fetishizes, overlooks, and stereotypes dark-skinned Black women.

In **Atlanta**, I found beautiful Black excellence but struggled with the dating scene and low wages. In **Houston**, I saw the hypocrisy of discrimination crossing cultural lines, while coworkers handed me backhanded compliments about being “the only Black person they liked.”

Every city left a mark, but it was my transition to international travel that tested the absolute boundaries of my fearlessness. I became a flight attendant, trading highways for runways. While traveling the world, I realized prejudice isn't exclusive to American borders. I experienced the worst racism of my life in **Cuba**, an encounter so severe it nearly made me walk away from international flights forever. But instead of letting fear ground me, I kept flying. I found solace, safety, and a true space to exhale in the beauty of **Bali** and **Mexico**.

Living out of a suitcase taught me what all those miles had been trying to say all along: home isn't a ZIP code, and it isn't just where your mother lives—even if she is your best friend for life. Home is wherever you feel safe enough to completely exhale.

Traveling the world as a dark-skinned Black woman is entirely unpredictable. Sometimes you are welcomed with open arms; sometimes you are sharply reminded of exactly how the world seeks to categorize you. But every road taken, every runway cleared, and every passport stamp earned has stripped away fear and built an unshakeable foundation. Every goodbye made me braver. Every boundary made me wiser. If I had to do it all over again, I would choose this skin, this journey, and being a Black woman in every single lifetime.

I am Gabrielle Shirley TS#27 of 52 of The Soultown Magazine. I want to thank you all for having SOUL! ✨

The Restless Runways of a Resilient Soul