

# Brooms, moving, and growing up: an essay/love letter to Hayao Miyazaki's Kiki's Delivery Service

written by Alex Leininger | August 8, 2017



I'd told myself that it would be different, moving to New York. For so long, its idealized specter was my saving grace – in theory, of course – as I navigated the daily drudgery of college in the Midwest.

Still, I'm from the Midwest, so I don't place any real judgment upon its vast plains and simple ways. Whether I like it or not, I'm wholeheartedly Midwestern both in disposition and action. We're good people, uncomplicated people and often relatively unsophisticated people. In Kansas City, my hometown, what you see is what you get, and I've always liked that. And still, I always planned to leave.

Now, when I say I planned to leave, I don't mean in any sort of angsty way. There was no Blink-182 soundtrack playing on the margins of my desire, nor was there ever a grand declaration that 18 would be the last wheat-weary year of my life as I kicked around empty soda cans and looked longingly upon the horizon.

My desire for flight stemmed more from what should come than what I'd leave behind, and, besides, nobody truly considers their future plans until they're really living them.

From an early age I looked forward, and the opportunities were always elsewhere. I'd often been told I was a good writer, and it wasn't long before I joined the high school newspaper and envisioned making a living by writing snark-filled columns with a fiercely moral center.

At 17, when I decided on a journalism major and witnessed the Big Apple in person for the first time, I finally saw the boundlessness that supposedly makes up our country's collective pie (that, and apples). I saw beyond the familiarity of prairie fields and into the bright lights of stardom – or at least promise.

In general, we Kansas Citians don't have much to brag by, or much to talk

about, really, other than our own endearing simplicity. It's probably true to say that we enjoy a high quality of life, even if its only because we're safe from the big show.

Growing up, my community's biggest claim to fame was Paul Rudd, who graduated from our high school. If you want to understand the heart of the Midwest on a more nationally relatable scale, look first to this goober. To this day, we Vikings savor Paul Rudd's phantom company knowing very well that other kids in New York or Los Angeles grew up with Tom Cruise's eerily symmetrical smile by their side, watching Channing Tatum do CrossFit through the blinds in their kitchen as RuPaul sashays off in the distance. We wear our irrelevance on our sleeves and pray that it comes off as charming or down-to-earth.

What's more is that a childhood in the heartland is one devoid of many harsh American stereotypes. With our flat, affectless accents and Blue Man Group fixations, we're neither the image of the worker nor the image of the aristocrat (although of course there are both, even here). We're the punch lines of Fargo and the decidedly Dorothy-esque, despite the fact that North Dakota is a far drive from Kansas and that the Kansas in the Wizard of Oz is a view of the state one sees only in the west, presumably on their way to Colorado for weed or literally any other reason.

All said, it's where my story starts. It's the basis of my perceptions and home to my most knee-jerk presumptions and judgments. To eventually move to a coast, as someone looking for a career in journalism is wont to do, was to forfeit the simplistic for the extravagant.

After graduating from journalism school, I look for opportunities wherever I could find them. After some time I was hired, mercifully, as an intern by someone who decided to give me a chance.

Off I went to Atlanta.

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When Kiki, a young witch, leaves home with her benevolent feline familiar as per the Broomstick Code, she feels more excited than anything. She's much younger than most are when they leave home, and so world-weariness is notably absent, leaving place instead for an unabashed joy.

The Broomstick Code of "Kiki's Delivery Service" mandates that all witches leave home on their 13<sup>th</sup> birthday to spend a year alone and, hopefully, find their true purpose. Kiki greets this task with an endearing bubblyness while her cat, Jiji, provides adult cynicism in her place, protecting her from the too-good-to-be-trues and illuminating her innocent youth by contrast. Jiji's comedic relief is more measured than others in the sidekick canon – whereas Patrick Star or Chewbacca might simplify a scene, Jiji grounds it. Of course he can't keep Kiki from flying off when she pleases, but it's enough that he cares enough to try.

When the pair runs into a snobbish older witch en route to their new home, Kiki reacts more with curiosity than envy. In Kiki's eyes, her elder's

experience has transformed her into the exemplar of prime witchcraft. The older witch sits with springboard posture upon an immaculately balanced broomstick, her words drenched with disdain for the younger witch's ignorance.

But we wonder, as viewers, just what it is that the older witch has. Is it worth it to gain something when you've lost the ability or the conviction to enjoy it? Should we be so eager to trade in our blissful ignorance for success?

In many ways, "Kiki's Delivery Service" is the perfect poster child for Hayao Miyazaki's animation empire, Studio Ghibli. Released in 1989, just a year after the smashing success of "My Neighbor Totoro", "Delivery Service" lives inside one of life's most interesting chasms. Charming and safe for children yet engaging and cerebral enough for parents, the film straddles youth and adulthood in a way that has since become the specialty of great animation.

The Broomstick Code to which Kiki abides is a familiar trope to readers of adventure fiction; a similar call to action uproots Harry Potter from his miserable home and sends him on a journey to save the wizarding world. It's a smart plot device because it's both far more exciting than the real thing. For us, it's a wonderful escape from the drudgery of growing up in a world that loses more and more magic each year.

And so it goes – Kiki's true purpose awaits her, but first she just needs to get the hang of riding a broom.

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I moved to Atlanta at the end of the summer. I'd been to the city about two years before on a school trip, making the tourist rounds and becoming acquainted with the city's historic reputation.

The drive from Kansas City to Atlanta is long and dull, and unless you're looking for a tour of the rural Midwest and South, it's a route you're better off without. But for my dad, my 1998 Buick Century and me, the trip was suffused with tension and joy. My young adulthood was at its ripest hour, and the opportunity to prove myself at one of America's largest media organizations was suddenly within my grasp.

Know this: Atlanta is very different than New York. It's a big city but a sprawling one, with insufficient public transportation that tries and fails to alleviate traffic. That's the city's calling card – traffic – and I remember clearly, on the very first night in town, circling our hotel, desperately searching for a parking spot and a place to rest our weary heads.

I'd only been guaranteed three months in Atlanta with my internship, and so I opted for a short-term stay at a rooming house close to my work. The cast of characters varied, with some older folks, some younger folks and some one-nighters who'd skedaddle just as soon as they'd come.

For the first month in Atlanta, I was fragile and lonely, eager to meet other interns and prove myself as more than just a cheaply dressed coffee machine

in lieu of Anne Hathaway. Having come to the South without any social network, I hastily organized a few get-togethers but mostly just watched the latest season of "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" in my shoebox of a room.

Once I settled into my new country-fried home, I met some local friends, who made fun of my pronunciation of "sriracha" but accompanied me on trips to the forests in northern Georgia. And I began settling into my new workplace, finding an outlet for my writing where I'd never expected to.

After the three-month internship was up, my bosses elected to extend my stay through the holiday season. At this point I was torn, obviously looking for any opportunity where I could find it but sad about not getting more than a week back home for Christmas. I stayed the extra month before learning they didn't have the money to offer me any sort of real employment.

In a flurry of applications come January, I fantasized once again about New York. Atlanta was a lovely experience but decidedly not for me, its roads ill matched to my rampant impatience and, by extension, dangerous to me, other drivers and my antique of a car.

One week before the end, just as the possibility of joblessness was rearing its dreadful head once again, I applied to a job in New York and was hired in less than a week. And so, the very next week, I was there.

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After a long, wild broomstick ride, Kiki and Jiji reach a busy port city very different from their hometown. True to their personalities, Kiki is overjoyed and Jiji is skeptical. Their entrance is quite memorable; not only is she a witch (which the city hasn't seen in years, according to the old man in the clocktower), but she loses control of her broomstick and weaves in and out of the crowds before miraculously landing unharmed in the street.

Now inside city limits, Kiki realizes that she needs to find a place to stay for the night before she can even consider her future. A boy her age named Tombo, who is impressed with her ability to fly and noticeably undeterred follows her around. She subsequently meets Osono, the jovial owner of a bakery, who agrees to let Kiki stay in her guest room if she helps out at the shop. Ah, finally: a purpose.

Thus begins the young witch's eponymous delivery service, although at first she's truly not very good at it. On her first delivery, she collides with a gust of wind and loses a toy cat near a horde of angry birds. Luckily, the toy looks identical to Jiji, who is willing (or more accurately, forced) to act as placeholder until the real thing is retrieved.

If anything, it's Kiki's mistakes that instigate her new friendships and ultimate victories. If her contagious effervescence leads us to believe that nothing will, or should, come between her and a sense of purpose, the film does nothing but challenge that notion. But it's precisely the fact that Kiki's goal takes time, effort and failure that makes her eventual success so rewarding.

After its release, "Delivery Service" was the first Studio Ghibli film to become available in the U.S., and its success was soon followed by English-language dubs of other beloved anime properties. When I consider emotional clarity on film, I think of course to Pixar and Disney, but first and foremost to Ghibli and its counterparts. If America's sensibility is for the brash and the rebellious, Japan's is for sincerity, heart and spirituality.

In Kiki's move to an unknown land, we're given a sense of harsh realism without an accompanying cynicism. Some of the other townspeople exhibit this – the ungrateful granddaughter to one of Kiki's most lovely clients, Tombo's uninviting friends – but Kiki's wholesomeness shines through always as a ray of hope.

Everything that can go wrong basically does, but she still comes out on top, still moving upward.

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It was different, at the end of January, when I hastily accepted a new opportunity in New York. Like I had with Atlanta, I'd been to New York before, but never to live. My experiences with the city were all in tourist-land, soaking up the infinitely refracted sunlight and riding the subway for fun.

Getting accustomed to the city's frumpy discourteousness (and alternately, it's impenetrable prudishness, with no middle ground) is much more like Kiki's journey than Atlanta ever was. I'm here in the land of dreams without much notice or preparation, desperately trying to look nonchalant among the yankee tides.

But if I look out of place when I gaze up at the obstructed sky or get offended by every dismissive gesture, it's just because I'm new here. And I'll learn. I'm older now, and I'm used to moving to and fro and establishing connections in places I might not stay for very long.

Atlanta was like that, as was D.C. when I interned there in 2015. Even moving to the middle of Missouri for college just a couple of hours outside of my hometown was significant, uprooting myself from the comfort of my youth into a stream of new faces and experiences. I remember reminiscing with friends on graduation night about our college years, doomed from the start to end as we move on to the next destination and the next after that.

We'll keep in touch with some of our friends and forget others, meeting plenty of new people until we find the ones that stick. Wherever we move to, and choose to stay, there'll be laughing, crying. Running, flying. Crashing, burning. Again and again.