Hikers in Davis Mountains State Park look to the west just before sunset.
It doesn’t take long after you move to Austin—right about the time you’ve chosen your favorite taco truck, figured out where to mount the long horns on the wall of your living room, and gotten your fill of barbecue and swear you won’t eat it again until someone comes to visit—for people to start telling you to go to Marfa. *Have you been to Marfa yet? It’s amazing. Let me know when you’re going: I’ll send you my list. You have to go to Marfa.*

I’ve been in Austin five years. And before y’all start—I’m from Amarillo. If you survived high school in Amarillo, you’re entitled to move to Austin whenever you please. It’s right there in the bylaws next to, “What happens at a pasture party, stays at a pasture party.” Anyway, I’d never made it out to Marfa. I couldn’t figure out what was so appealing about driving seven hours to a tiny town where, from what I could figure looking at Instagram posts, the only thing to see was a fake Prada store. It seemed like the main reason to go to Marfa was to post pictures on social media. This spring, I decided to hit the road with my dog, Woody Guthrie, and put this theory to the test by doing the opposite—going offline.

Here’s the thing: I’m an unrepentant Twitter addict. I don’t fancy spending a few days off social media. I complain about my problem often to my 100,000 followers. It started innocently, or at least there was a point to being on Twitter. I wanted to be a writer. and since I don’t live in New York. Twitter was the place I could make friends with real writers, the kind who have their names on books. They tell you that unless you’re a celebrity or politician, you need a platform to sell a book. So, I built a platform. It worked. I’ve sold stories on Twitter, gotten the attention of agents and editors, and even sold a book, *Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing*, a *New York Times* bestselling collection of coming-of-age essays. I’ve made real friends and developed more than a few crushes. These justifications sound a lot like the lies I used to tell myself about smoking: *It’s a great way to meet people!* You’re standing outside the bar, you ask to borrow a lighter, and a two-hour conversation later, you’re in love.

The ugly side of the addiction is I must feed the beast, provide content, weigh in on subjects. The next thing I know, hundreds of people are calling me names, encouraged by professional bullies, and Woody Guthrie’s wondering why I keep looking at the stupid glowing thing that makes me sad when I could be on a walk. I tell myself it doesn’t matter. Only Twitter pays any attention to Twitter. But those pile-ons, even the silly controversies, leave a mark. I mean, am I really a domestic terrorist for feeding cheese to my dog?

I’ll tell anyone who’ll listen that we should all spend less time on social media. It’s bad for us. It’s rewiring our brains. It’s causing us to be more isolated. We’ve forgotten how to talk to one another. Because I was having a hard time telling myself that, I figured I needed this trip to Marfa and the challenge it presented.
IT WAS NEARLY DARK BY THE TIME

I pulled into the Riata Inn on the edge of town and got a room. Then I drove around looking everywhere for something to eat, but the place looked deserted. Marfa is laid out like any town on the West—a highway crossroads, a railroad track, a main street, and in the center a courthouse and a few businesses and hotels with flat facades and awnings over the sidewalks.

I cut back to US 90 running through town. The requisite Dairy Queen was closed. One of the two gas stations I saw was open. I resigned myself to a dinner of beef jerky and pretzels and headed back to the inn at the edge of town. The tour of Marfa took five, maybe seven minutes, including the dinner run. I was kind of bored without my phone, but I managed to fall asleep without scrolling through a stream of bad news and insults.

In the morning, I found a small café called Do Your Thing, where the thing I did was purchase a coffee and an avocado toast. The coffee came topped with a painstakingly created flower in the foam. I almost felt bad for ruining the barista’s art by putting a lid on it. But since I couldn’t post a picture of the exquisite foam, I didn’t need to preserve it.

I was sitting outside sipping coffee and wondering what other West Texas cafés serve avocado toast. I could have pulled out my phone and Googled something like “Things to do in Marfa.” But I’d made it this far without using the internet. The thing is, I couldn’t remember anyone telling me what to do in Marfa. Of all those people who told me to go to Marfa, not one of them mentioned why.

While I was considering what to do next, a guy in paint-splattered boots stopped to pet Woody Guthrie. It helps, when you’re the type of person who can’t send back a well-done steak, to have the friendly sort of dog who people stop to pet. It’s easier to talk to someone who’s already petting your dog. I’m not saying I use him as hair, but I’m not not saying it. I asked the Palmer: If there were any parks around where I could walk a dog. He said there was a dog park, but he’d never seen anyone use it. He asked if I’d checked out the Chinati Foundation. The question must’ve shown on my face. He explained that it’s an outdoor art installation. “Are you into postmodernism, buddy?” he asked Woody Guthrie.
Barista Christopher Ellison pours a latte at Do Your Thing Coffee.
A couple minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot of Chinati, which was founded by Donald Judd, the artist who put Marfa on the map. I opened the hatch door to let Woody Guthrie out and while he peed on a fence, I read the sign: “Pets are not allowed anywhere on the grounds.” I thought it would be a cool trick to teach Woody Guthrie to pee on “No Pets” signs. I could make a whole photo series on Instagram, maybe get the series displayed in an art gallery. But I’ve barely managed to convince him he’s not allowed to pee on indoor plants. I wondered how Chinati’s doing convincing coyotes to not pee on Judd’s concrete boxes. I told Woody Guthrie I was sorry. We’d never know how he feels about postmodernism.

I put him back in the car and headed to the one place I knew there’d be a nice green lawn—the Presidio County Courthouse. The beautiful pink stucco building was designed in 1886 by Alfred Giles, the same architect who designed the El Paso County Courthouse. The road leading up to the courthouse is lined with hotels—the Saint George and the Lincoln and the Paisano, where the crew stayed while filming Giant. I wondered what James Dean thought of Marfa. That kid would’ve been a natural at Instagram.

Just as I hoped, the courthouse is surrounded by a lush green lawn. After circling a few times—Woody Guthrie making sure every tree was checked thoroughly for squirrels—we regrouped at the car. While Woody Guthrie considered whether he’d drink water or die of thirst as revenge for my not allowing him to sniff roadkill, Joe Kocks approached. He wanted to know if he could introduce his dogs to mine.

Joe said he comes to Marfa every year. He likes the weather; unlike Austin, standing in the shade here is nearly pleasant in May. “I haven’t even run my air conditioner yet,” he said. Joe’s retired now. He brings his dogs—Belvin, Buttercup, and Bella—and stays for a month or two. He’s been thinking about buying a place out here, but the prices are as bad as Austin. Marathon, the next town over from Alpine, is too small—only 400 people. And while Alpine’s larger, at 6,000, it’s a little... Joe didn’t finish the sentence, just waved his hand. I asked if he’s on social media. “Sure, but I don’t use it much,” he said. I felt some air go out of my theory that people only visit Marfa to brag about it.
If you ask Joe, and I did, the best thing about Marfa isn’t the art; it’s the food. That’s if you can find any. He said Marfa’s restaurant schedules take some getting used to. Some days places are open 9 a.m. to noon, some days 1 to 5, some days not at all. At Joe’s insistence, I stopped at Marfa Burrito. I’d seen pictures of the burritos on Instagram. I wanted to make a joke about the size of one and the weight limits of paper plates. As I reached for my phone, dropping my burrito in the process, I remembered that no-posting-on-Twitter rule. No one would call me a terrorist for sharing the fallen burrito with Woody Guthrie. Besides, you can’t smell a picture. You don’t get to walk in the door and inhale the spices, chiles, and fresh sausage.

Fortified, I decided it was time to visit what I assume is the crown jewel of Marfa. That meant leaving Marfa because, of course, it’s not in Marfa at all. Back in the car and about 6 miles west on US 90, I passed a cluster of larger-than-life cutouts depicting the film Giant—Reata Ranch, a Cadillac, Elizabeth Taylor, and James Dean again. The cutouts were erected by John Cerney, an artist who creates giant murals of Americana. A giant cutout of Giant was inevitable.

Thirty miles later, I pulled off the road in Valentine to look at what’s possibly the strangest art installation in Texas: Prada Marfa. Like I mentioned, it’s not an actual Prada store. It’s a permanent art installation by Elmgreen and Dragset, a duo whose witty work is cultural commentary on art and architecture. The building’s stocked with a few Prada products—purses and shoes from what I could see through the glass storefront. But the door’s not made for allowing customers to come in and browse. There’s nothing around the store but a fence with hundreds of padlocks—“love locks”—left by visitors.

If I felt ridiculous standing out there on the highway in the middle of nowhere outside a closed Prada store that would never open, Woody Guthrie thought I was a fool. I tried to get him to pose for a couple pictures. I told him all the cool people do it. Beyoncé took a picture right here, posted it on Instagram. Do you want to be an influencer or not? But I was out of beef jerky, and he knew it. He scanned the windows for anything interesting. Seeing nothing, he made it clear the Italian haute couture was beneath him and headed back to the car.
Ballroom María is a beacon of contemporary art.
THAT NIGHT AROUND SUNSET. Woody Guthrie met his new best friends, my motel neighbors, a mother-daughter duo who assured him he was a very good boy. "Are you headed out to see the lights?" they asked us. I thought I might join them and see what all the fuss was about.

I vaguely remember people mentioning the lights. No one could tell me what they were about. I figured it was the usual folk tale—aliens or spirits. There's a viewing area near what was once an air base, about 10 miles east of Marfa. Beyond the viewing area are the grasslands of the Chihuahuan Desert.

All I know about the Marfa Lights is what I read on the historical marker. In 1883 a cowboy named Robert Ellison reported mysterious lights on the horizon. He thought the lights were Apache campfires. According to a marker, the Apache believed the lights were stars falling from the sky. Other theories: UFOs, St. Elmo's fire, ghosts, and headlights from US 67.

I found my motel neighbors, Jean Smith and her daughter Kelley Simon, already settled in on a bench. They invited me to join them. Having sniffed around plenty while I read historical markers, Woody Guthrie was happy to settle in for a nap. As we waited for the sun to set, Jean and Kelley said this was their second time trying to see the lights. They'd come out to Marfa on their last mother-daughter road trip, a yearly event, and got stuck in an ice storm. So, they were trying again. I asked them, why Marfa?
“Back in Mansfield, we’re doing good to count six stars,” Jean said.

“Because we haven’t seen the lights yet,” Kelley added.

Somehow, I think I’d forgotten how fun it is to converse with the folks right beside me. These are the situations where I’ll usually pull out my phone and scroll mindlessly while I wait. Instead, we talked and traded road trip stories while we waited for the lights. Occasionally, we’d debate whether that light over by that fence post was there a minute ago. And did it move? Two lights appeared, turned into one, then turned into two again. It was weird. I couldn’t explain the lights we saw, and I wasn’t going to spout off ideas about headlights.

Since neither mother nor daughter pulled out a phone to so much as take a selfie, my theory that people only come to Marfa to post about Marfa was now fully deflated. I wasn’t going to risk damage to another.

After a while, I realized it had been hours since I even thought to look at my phone. I didn’t know what anyone on Twitter was arguing about. I didn’t care what names I was being called by people who’d never met me. Were they as real as the Marfa Lights—only real if you stare long enough? I realized if I didn’t check Twitter, I’d never know. Maybe it matters what happens online. But for a moment, it didn’t matter, not to me, not to my new friends on the bench next to me, not to the coyotes singing out in the grasslands beyond the fence.

The sky was full of stars, but none of us were dressed for the cold weather. If anyone asked, we agreed, we’d say we’d seen something. And we had. Maybe. There were definitely lights. It’s hard to say what ghosts or aliens are meant to look like. But if anyone asks, we saw them.
Gas station food is sometimes the only option.
THE NEXT MORNING, I took Woody Guthrie for a hike so he’d forgive me the seven-hour drive back to Austin. Davis Mountains State Park is 25 miles outside of Marfa. The park ranger who checked my veteran card said, “Keep the dog on a leash and watch out for javelinas.” I’m pretty sure she meant I should avoid javelinas. I’ve never seen a javelina, so every time someone tells me to watch out for them, I half wonder if they’re just making stuff up. Little snuffling pig-like creatures? Sure. I’ll keep an eye out.

She asked if I’d been to the park before. Nope. I said we’d come because Woody Guthrie wasn’t impressed with Marfa. She said a lot of folks find their way here from there. Once you’ve seen the Prada store, which isn’t even in Marfa, what else is there to do, especially with a dog? She asked if I’d seen the lights, and true to my word, I said I had.

I spent the morning hiking the trails with Woody Guthrie. We didn’t see any javelinas. We did see a blacktail rattlesnake and a couple scorpions, though. If you spend any time hiking in Texas, you spend most of that time looking at the ground, making sure the next step won’t snap your ankle or something won’t snap at your ankle. Once we reached the first crest, I looked to the sky.

It was a perfect day, just cool enough to wear jeans and a T-shirt. The wind had calmed to a breeze. And right there above me was the answer to at least one question.

I may have been wrong about the social media thing. I thought I’d miss it. I thought it would drive me crazy not knowing what was happening in the world, not having anyone to talk to, not engaging some unhinged response to Hey; look at this picture of my dog refusing to pose in front of the Prada store. Instead, I wondered how much I’d missed during all that time I spent looking at my phone. Maybe you can’t choose happiness. But sometimes you can choose what to look at.

I bet those people who insist you go to Marfa hope you’ll figure it out on your own, that sometimes you have to look up at the stars or out at the lights and talk with the folks right next to you.

From the November 2022 issue