

Looking back, I can't think of all those times in New York without also thinking about the accompanying train rides along the Northeast Corridor. After taking a fifteen-minute walk to Edison station, I would take NJ transit to New York-Penn and then walk down 34th street until I got to 6th avenue. From there I took the Q train all the way down to 7th avenue in Brooklyn.

I didn't always take the train in. I drove the first few times. It was in the fall of 2014, when I had already been acquainted with Sharon and Kurt, that I made the switch. "It's probably faster to drive here, right?" they would say. "Cheaper too." I muttered something about miles on my car and not worrying about parking, and they took the answer as sufficient.

And while what they said was true—the train did take longer, and it did cost more—I grew an affinity for NJ Transit that I couldn't claim about my car rides. The passive nature of taking the train made New York less like a premeditated destination and more like a fantasy world. After being subjected to the shoddy vistas of the Springsteenian jungleland that was the Garden State, the next thing I knew, I was at the source of the bright lights that I always knew as the backdrop of my home state. And, at the source, those lights shone a whole lot brighter.

The whole thing reminded me of this book we read in fifth grade: *Bridge to Terabithia*. The book was about two kids who found this rope above a creek in their hometown woods. They swung across the creek and founded a magical kingdom in the fields of the other side that was entirely theirs to rule. They named it Terabithia. Anybody who read the story remembers the narrative in a bittersweet light. Toward the end of the book, the girl tries to go to Terabithia on her own, but the rope breaks,

and she hits her head on a rock and drowns in the creek. *Bridge to Terabithia* was the first book in my life that confronted death in such a direct way, and, in hindsight, it probably shaped my adolescence more than I gave it credit for.

All that aside, I was looking for that Terabithia in my life. I worked an unspectacular job: middle-school French in a middling Middlesex county township. My romantic partners were few and far between. The only redeeming part of my mid-twenties ended up being those times spent in the city with Jeff.

Jeff was my junior-and-senior-year roommate at my alma mater: Trinity College in Hartford. We went our separate ways when we graduated in 2012. Two years later, in the spring of 2014, Jeff invited me to his housewarming party in his new apartment in Brooklyn. He had just moved there after landing an advertising job in Manhattan and wanted to seize the opportunity for us to catch up. That night, we went up to the roof of his building, drunk, with the Manhattan skyline in the far distance, and we decided to make these occasions a regular part of our lives.

The plan was for me to come up every couple months. At first, it was just the two of us. Then Jeff's coworkers Kurt and Sharon joined the fun that summer. I was nervous when Jeff suggested his coworkers partake in our escapades. I didn't want to feel like the odd man out among colleagues who spent most of their week together. I had to go along though as I didn't want to disturb the peace in the only working thing I had in my social life. My strategy was to go with the flow.

To my surprise, that strategy was not damage control. It was a path to victory. It seemed as though my nonchalance about tagging along, almost by unintentional reverse psychology, made Jeff's coworkers latch on to me as some sort of escapism

from their nine-to-fives. I wasn't becoming a part of their lives; they were becoming a part of mine. I was the link to life outside of the social circle of their professional network. The connection stuck, and we didn't look back. Instead of two guys stumbling around in the big city, we were a legitimate squad. Our nights went from good to transcendental.

The peak was when I visited in April of 2015. It was starting to get nice out again after another winter in the northeast, and my mood was boosted on command. It was as if an amazing night were inevitable. We hit Koreatown that night and went from restaurant to bar to bar. To end the night, drunk off beer and soju, we went to a noraebang.

I sang "Desperado" by The Eagles. Standing up in front of my friends, microphone in hand, I had one of those moments in my life I had only experienced a couple times, one of those moments where everything felt right. Even if my life wasn't perfect, there became this poeticism that was impressed upon it. It felt like everything was leading to that moment of bliss. I had no worries—just happiness. No currency, no material object, no human connection could compare to that feeling.

For my last visit of summer 2015, we decided to have a "greatest hits" night where we had a couple rounds in all of the bars in Brooklyn that housed the most memorable times of the summer. Our last stop was a basement bar across the street from Prospect Park.

The only other patron there was a young man drinking alone at the bar. He took my attention, so much so that, even as we shuffled into a booth in the corner and started our first rounds, I couldn't divert my attention from him. Nobody came back

from the bathroom to reunite with him. He wasn't looking over his shoulder to see if his friend finally arrived. He wasn't on his phone or reading a book. He just drank his beer and looked at the array of spirits behind the bar with the stoicism of a late-19th-century protagonist.

Before long, Sharon, who was sitting to my perpendicular left, caught onto my fixation.

"What are you looking at, Brad?" she asked. She tried to align with my gaze.

"That guy over there," I said. Everyone else turned and looked toward the bar. "All he's done since we got here is drink his beer. It's like he's meditating or something."

"Ask him to join us," Kurt said. "It's been a derivative night anyway. We need to shake things up before we can put this summer in the books."

I walked over to him. He didn't notice me right away. "Excuse me," I said. He turned toward me. I couldn't tell before, but we resembled each other. He just hadn't filled out his form yet—seeing from his protruding cheek bones. "My friends and I saw you from across the bar, and we wanted to see if you could join us." He craned his neck and saw my friends. They waved at him.

He introduced himself as Andrew. He was tense at first, hunched over his glass. Our genial nature seemed to warm him up though. He settled in quick.

"My parents told me they're getting a divorce," he said.

"Oh, man," Jeff said. "When did they tell you?"

"Tonight over dinner." We all looked at each other. "I don't even live in the city. I'm from Pennsylvania. After dinner, I got in my car and started driving. I didn't

have a destination in mind. I just followed wherever the road took me, and it took me to New York.” He took a sip of his drink. “Do you guys all live in Brooklyn?”

“Most of us,” Jeff said. “Kurt lives on Long Island. Brad lives in Jersey.”

Andrew turned to me. “Brad, did you take the train in, or did you drive here?”

“I took the train in,” I said.

“Good move,” he said. “Parking is tough here! I figured it would be manageable because it wasn’t Manhattan, but I felt out of my element when I had to do it.”

“I hear that,” I said. My friends giggled nervously.

“Is that why you took the train in?” he asked. “So you didn’t have to worry about parking?”

“Yeah, that’s why,” I said.

“Brad doesn’t really like to talk about parallel parking,” Jeff said.

“Oh,” Andrew said, sinking into his seat. “Sorry I asked.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “You opened yourself up to us, Andrew. The least I can do is return the favor.” My friends leaned in.

“I had driven up here a handful of times by the time fall 2014 rolled around. It was a straightforward drive. Take the turnpike to 287, cross through Staten Island, and you’re here. I was thrown off by the parking my first few drives in, but I got a hang of it the third or fourth time.

“So I was making my October visit, and I was in Brooklyn looking for parking. My friends were already at a café, and I was going to meet them there. The actual street the café was on was too congested with parked cars, so I took a left and tried

for the side street. No luck there either. I took a lap around the block and came up empty-handed. It was the classic car-car-driveway-car-driveway-car-car-fire hydrant-car routine.

“I took my second lap around, and it was there that I started to get antsy. I was late as it was, and parking was becoming officially a concern. Much to my luck though, a car about 100 feet in front of me pulled out and left me a spot. I put on my hazards and pulled up to the spot. Everything seemed to be going according to plan. When I looked in my rearview mirror though, I saw like five cars behind me, way more than I’d expect on a sidestreet. That threw me off. I tried to back in, but I cut it too early. I was too far from the curb. The street was a narrow one-way, so the cars behind me couldn’t get around me until I finished parking. So I pulled out quick and backed in again, but, this time, I cut too late and hit the curb. At that point, I was panicking. I knew this was going to be my last try at this spot, and it was embarrassing because it wasn’t even a tight squeeze. I could feel the car behind me noticing my New Jersey license plate and silently judging me and my homeland.

“So I pulled out again and took a deep breath. I was about to back in one last time when I noticed something flash across my rearview camera: there was this squirrel that cozied up against the curb. I didn’t think much of it. I figured I could back in, and the squirrel would notice the car and run away, the same way you kept walking on the sidewalk when there were pigeons in front of you. You just expected them to get out of your way. I put my car in reverse, and something changed. The wheel turned like butter. The car twisted like a flamingo dancer. I cut it at the

perfect time. I must have been two inches away from the curb. I was hitting the brakes when I heard it. *Crunch.*

“I put the gear in park and turned off my hazards, but I didn't do anything else for about a minute. Then I felt my phone vibrate—that continuous vibration you got for phone calls—and I knew it was Jeff calling me to ask me where I was. That did it for me. I turned off the car, undid my seat belt, and got out. I knew that I had to confront what I'd done though. So I crept around my car to the passenger's side and inched toward the back tire, where the impact was.

“All I saw was its tail. I could have crouched under the car, but something told me I wasn't supposed to do that, that this was the image I was supposed to see. Of course, when I left the next morning, everyone walking down that block saw what I had done. The only way I could come to a resolution with myself was by taking the train into the city from then on.”

We downed our drinks, paid, and left. We took care of Andrew's tab. As we climbed up the steps out of there, Andrew looked at Prospect Park quizzically, as if someone had dropped it there while we were down in the bar.

“Is that a well-known park?” he asked.

“Only the most well-known park in Brooklyn,” Sharon said.

“What do you guys say about a little midnight stroll in the park?” Kurt asked us.

“Nice way to close out the summer.”

We walked in silence for a couple minutes before Andrew spoke up.

“I want to thank you, Brad, for opening yourself up like that,” he said. He was behind me, so I had to keep looking over my shoulder for intermittent eye contact.

“Your story reminded me about how precious life is. That’s when I realized it: all we have is each other. My parents probably need me more than I need them right now, and I’m not there for them. I wasn’t planning on coming back anytime soon, but, after hearing your story, I think I’m going to drive back home first thing in the morning.”

“Wow,” I said. “I’m surprised that made such an impact on you, Andrew. To be honest, I thought I was bumming everyone out by confiding everyone in that whole thing.”

“Absolutely not, Brad,” Kurt said. He put his hand on my shoulder. “Take the train all you’d like. We don’t care.”

“Andrew, where’d you end up parking?” I asked, but, when I looked over, he stood still behind us, gazing into Prospect Park Lake...which had just opened up to our left. “Hey, wait up, guys,” I said. We walked back to him.

“Sorry, guys,” Andrew said, snapping out of his funk. “It’s just that, when we lived in my old house, we had a pool in our backyard. There was this one summer where we spent almost every day in that pool. That was the last summer before things got bad. Seeing this lake, it just reminded me of those times.”

“You know what we gotta do now, right?” Sharon said.

We shed our clothes. Sharon got in first. Andrew, Kurt, and I followed. Jeff was making a show of his entrance. “Did you guys know I was a two-time finalist at the Connecticut State Cannonball Tournament?” he said. He ran back a few yards to give himself a runway.



I saw everything that happened after that as a projectile graph I guess you'd see in a physics class, with the execution of the projectile matching the trajectories. Andrew had waded over, unbeknownst to himself, to Jeff's target area just as Jeff had charged forward, launched, and tucked his legs in.

"Jeff, no!" I yelled. Andrew lifted his head to see Jeff land on top of him.

*Crunch.*

Andrew didn't come up to the surface. After a moment, we each took turns swimming down to try to find him. Try to find his body. We had to rely on touch; the water was an unforgivable black. One after another, we came up with the same distraught look on our faces. When Jeff, the final diver in the rotation, followed suit, we silently acknowledged that Andrew was gone.

There wasn't much discussion as to what to do next. All the pros that came with reporting this to the authorities wasn't worth the risk of possible jail time. We tied Andrew's clothes to heavy rocks and let them sink. We waited for a few minutes and shone our phones on the water to make sure his wallet didn't catch loose and float back up to the surface.

Once that was taken care of, we headed to Jeff's apartment to throw our clothes in the dryer. On our walk out of the park, a pigeon cooed.

"Is that an owl?" Jeff asked.

"I think that's a pigeon, Jeff," Sharon said.

"No, that's an owl," Jeff said.

"There are no owls in Brooklyn, Jeff," Kurt said.

"I know an owl when I hear one!" Jeff said.

“Okay, Jeff,” I said. “It’s an owl. It’s an owl.”

Sharon and Kurt stopped hanging out with us after that night. I was never sure how their work relationship with Jeff recovered. My guess was not well. It was hard to imagine Jeff retain his normal self at work. He changed after that night. Lethargy and jitters. Mood swings. It was like he was recovering from brain damage. I tried to steer him clear of bodies of water whenever we hung out together, but it’s hard to avoid water when you live on an island.

It didn’t break me though, seeing Jeff like that. I had myself to worry about. One could say I was as responsible for Andrew’s death as Jeff was, having taken such interest in him. Granted, it was Kurt’s idea to take that walk in the park. It was Sharon’s idea to go swimming. We all played our part in the events of that night, but none of that would have happened if I hadn’t taken interest in that kid. Was I absolved because I called out to Jeff at the last second, right as my mind was able to process what was about to happen? More often than not, my answer was no.

There was one recurring thought I’d have, one that was exclusive to many a late night as I was struggling to sleep: did Andrew go out on a high? His parents had a failed marriage, and having divorced parents wasn’t a bargain either. What if his parents resented him for running away? What if his adult life was going to be full of tragedy and sorrow? No one could say for sure.

One thing was for certain though: when he did go out, he went out wading in the nude in Prospect Park Lake, surrounded by people he hardly knew yet connected with on a spiritual level, spirited with mindset that things between him and his

parents were finally going to be good again. It was that scattered thought that finally allowed me to drift off to sleep.

But that analysis was paced out over the weeks that followed that fateful night. As we walked back to Jeff's house, threw our clothes in the drier, and tried to comfort each other, in towels, in the living room, my mind wasn't on Andrew or Andrew's family or Prospect Park Lake. It was on which Northeast Corridor train I was going to take that morning.