

The Night I Almost Die

I close the book and stare for a moment at the blinds. The common room is dark behind me. I flip off the AC, throw on a sweatshirt, and slip out, careful not to wake my roommates.

At the corner, on a whim, I exchange a dollar for an energy drink. I walk half a block west before turning back, deciding, on another whim, to take the subway.

On the platform, I pace, pausing only to re-read the subway map I've already memorized as well as any familiar face. I'm trying to understand where I'm going, where my whims are taking me, so late at night, where it was I must have had in mind the moment I closed that book, because I'm a big believer in this, that I must have had somewhere in mind whether I realized it or not, that destiny is imaginable but cannot be depicted until set out for.

It's not long before I realize that I am returning for the first time to the place where, six months ago, I almost died.

And once I do – once I realize this – that's when those memories of dreams and drunkenness, those so difficult to distinguish, really start to consume me. I pace more rhythmically now, settling into a thought process, head bowed, brow furrowed intently. I focus upon the moving spot on the platform upon which I will step three steps from now, and three steps later, six steps from now, and so on, my focus always three steps ahead. Only when the train comes is my trance briefly broken. There, I stand, unable to sit. I count a million eyes avoiding mine, times two. When I turn to face my reflection in the window, I see it's only my ghost, keeping pace effortlessly in the tunnel.

I transfer once, and there I am, within walking distance. I take the stairs two at a time, crush and throw out my energy drink, orienting myself. The river is east. The bridge is north, running east.

The bridge is as central to the night I almost died as the river. That night I almost died, according to my then-girlfriend – for I have no memory of that night, only clues, testimony – I was close enough to a

bridge to tell her over the phone, “I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!” So east I go, for the river, along which I could follow to the bridge.

I walk through Chinatown, empty enough at this hour for me to feel everyone besides me is drunk or lost or both. I make a left for every right, head north for every block east, surprised at how, in my sobriety, uncomfortable I realize I am walking due east for the water, away from the safety of the city’s brightest lights.

But zigzagging is fine, I tell myself. It’s okay to be careful returning to the place I was the night I almost died. Any combination of heading north and/or east will lead me to where the bridge meets the river, be it first to the bridge or first to the river. Plus, exactly where I was going – where exactly by the bridge, by the river, I was the night I almost died – could be anywhere between here and there. I am in the vicinity already.

And I can picture it. Even though I have no memory of that night, I have a picture of what it is I’m looking for – a baseball field. Because in the morning, on our way back from breakfast, after the night I’d almost died taking four-plus hours to walk the twelve blocks to my then-girlfriend’s apartment, I realized the dirt on my dress shoes was without a doubt baseball field dirt, and accepting that premise concluded that I had to at some point the night before, during those four-plus (five, six, maybe seven) hours stepped foot on a baseball field by the bridge. I pointed this out to her. She shook her head, saying she was just happy I was alive and that she didn’t want to talk about it. And until tonight, I was content with that happiness, too. Until tonight, I had no interest in returning to the place I’d almost died.

Except, now we’ve broken up again, and so tonight, here I am, looking for a baseball field by the bridge.

I turn onto a bright, wide, empty street approaching a granite archway as imposing as any Arc de Triomf. It holds up a bridge, but it’s not the bridge I think I must have been referring to when I told her “I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!” And yet, of course, considering the night I almost died, considering the four plus forgotten hours during which I could’ve gone anywhere in the city, this couldn’t be ruled out as having been the bridge.

A long building gives way to a high chain-linked fence, the kind of fence you see enclosing baseball fields, and through the fence, I see

bleachers. I squint, searching for dirt in the darkness, but it looks like just a fenced-in field of grass to me, with bleachers there at random or for some other sport.

So I power on through the archway, relieved, newly alerted, as if having just avoided an accident my own carelessness nearly caused, past the Manhattan Bridge.

The baseball field I am picturing, since I have no memory of the night I almost died, must be from another memory, another night, a night I cannot place, I think. Because I don't picture Yankee Stadium or my little league field or any of the fields I used to rake one summer, but an unknown field, a field from another memory, dreamt or otherwise, a stray visual memory lost in time, renting the empty space in the photo album of my mind between the hours of 1:00 and 7:00 am, approximately, on January 1, 2013.

I hear voices and laughter ahead, young people in a car talking to young people congregating on the corner. I look both ways to cross against the power of the streetlight, and hear gunshots. About a dozen of them. I look up. They disperse frantically, away from the idling car. But laughing, on the other corner now. I get that they were fireworks, Independence Day preparations.

Besides the fact that the field I am picturing might be dreamt up or from another city altogether, I don't have Internet on my phone, so I can't even look up where the baseball fields in the area are. And because I didn't realize where I'd been heading all along until I'd already left my apartment, I hadn't looked up anything beforehand. But that was okay. It was all okay, because I didn't have to work tomorrow, and I didn't have Internet on my phone that night I almost died, either, and so if I could find a baseball field then, I should be able to find it easily enough tonight, sober. It was, after all, a big baseball field by the bridge, on this side of the river. If I didn't hit it before I hit the intersection of bridge and river, I'd hit it soon after.

I walk through the last bit of gunpowder, hearing another dozen go off behind me, remembering how we'd watch fireworks from the hill, snack, play football with tennis balls until our knees bled or we'd hit a stranger in the back...

And here's the park. Corlears Hook Park. I look towards the river, two or three blocks away. This could be the park. I scan the darkness for

dirt once again. I see a chain-linked fence in the shape of a baseball diamond's backstop. It's a baseball field, but without dirt. I am relieved, again. I think that when I do see the field, I will remember everything. And looking out at Corlears Hook Park, I wasn't feeling that. So there's still hope for the real thing.

But since the park is open, and since I still want to go north, I decide to cut through it anyway.

I walk down a wide path lined with benches and active gaslights. A couple walks their dog. A public urinator emerges from the bushes by the locked public restroom. I sit for a moment, to rest and take in the image of what I see and what I am imagining – the line of benches, the turf baseball field, the highway, FDR Dr. (the whishing of cars upon which sounds like the ocean), the East River, my neighborhood across the river, the Atlantic Ocean, the Strait of Gibraltar, Mecca...

In that unplaced memory I've unconsciously retrieved to fill the emptiness of the night I almost died, I am at a baseball field at night, watching a friend of mine climb a chain-linked fence and run off, leaving me behind. We'd been drinking and there were others, and yet he left all of us behind to climb a fence we couldn't or dared not try to. I am not ten feet away from him when he makes it over, but the fence that divides us resembles an eternity.

Somehow, the path ends up meeting FDR Dr., the highway I thought I'd been walking parallel to all this time. A pleasant surprise, considering I've avoided heading due east for the river, but needed to get there eventually.

And there, just a few blocks north, is the bridge.

But where is the baseball field? Could I have missed it, with all my zigzagging? I thought I would've hit it by now, somewhere along the way, thinking I would never actually wind up all the way at the end point of my route, the exact intersection of riverside and bridge.

In that unplaced memory, I can't make out much beyond the baseball field. There are no landmarks in the distance that might clue me in as to where this unknown baseball field is. I don't even know if it's by a river.

I don't know what it is I'm looking for anymore.

The whole thing reminds me of another night I almost died, another night involving this bridge, but I don't want to think about that night right

now. That night has nothing to do with the other. Instead I think about how, compared to the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, the Williamsburg Bridge looks way more modern, like way obviously more modern, like without any intention of hiding its modernity, but not in a new-and-improved state-of-the-art way, just in a cheap-alternative sort of way, the way fakes proceed originals. And yet, it's my favorite bridge. Tonight, I decide, I must walk home across it again, after I find what I came here for, whatever it looks like exactly.

I take a picture of the bridge from below, with my phone.

"I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!"

I think back again to when my then-girlfriend told me I'd told her that. I think back to that often. And then thanking her, calling her an angel, apologizing.

And I know that the unplaced memory has to have been from before the night I almost died, not just since my friend climbing the fence in the memory had left the country by then, but because, thinking back now, I remembered that memory that same morning after. I'd noticed the dirt on my shoes, identified the dirt as baseball dirt, tried to remember a baseball field, and thought of my friend climbing the fence! The association was essentially instantaneous, the visual of my friend filling the void in my memory before any other visual could.

And yet I am still lost. I still have no clue as to where to go from here, from this intersection. I head west, walking along Delancey St., under the bridge that continues overhead for blocks before leveling with the street, ready for a baseball field to pop up at any time.

I pass a homeless man sleeping, and remember how lucky I've been with the weather. I think that if I were a homeless man, sleeping outside under a bridge on a warm, dry night wouldn't be so terrible. Half a dozen homeless men later, I realize that, yes, all homeless men must share my sentiments.

The bridge meets the street, becomes level with the street.

I consider heading back home over the bridge right now, on a whim. I haven't found what I want, but walking the bridge always makes for a productive night. I realize I can be as whimsical as I want, whenever I want, now, without a girlfriend or a job.

But on another whim, I think, no. Walking the bridge is a reward. I

need to stick to that. If I can't find a baseball field that I found when I was blackout drunk and certainly unable to walk straight, then I am an unworthy loser deserving of nothing more than the shame of riding the subway home alone on a beautiful summer night. So north it is. I haven't looked everywhere. I haven't looked north of the bridge.

And now that I think about it, that's where the baseball field probably had to be anyway, north of the bridge. Because north of the bridge was where the final memories I've retained of that night are set. The nightclub in which I'd lost my friends was on Houston St., not Delancey St., just three blocks north. And I realize that, assuming this was the mistake, I had to have been on the baseball field *before* making it to the bridge. It's a key realization in the piecing together of my night. I imagine myself as a shark sensing blood, imagining which senses they use if not all of them, and using all of them!

I walk up Clinton and make a right on Rivington. The field could be anywhere within this rectangle I can visualize: Houston, Delancey, Clinton, and FDR Dr., as its four sides. And yet it was still a substantial rectangle, too large for a man standing on its plane to trace with his naked eye, the size of more than a dozen baseball fields at least, still, so it was no use second-guessing my decision to turn onto Rivington, on a whim, there being so much ground to cover.

A chain-linked fence ahead, sporting darkness beyond, looks promising, but as I approach, I see it's just a playground, without dirt, a really nice playground...

And I remember what must've happened.

What must've happened was that after exiting the club on Houston St., I must have mistaken Houston for Delancey, Delancey being the street that turns into the bridge. I must have decided, lethally drunk, to walk home over the Williamsburg Bridge to reward myself for not merely remaining faithful to my then-girlfriend who I'd been arguing with and who was also working that night, but also outlasting – outpartying – all of my friends at the nightclub, making sure I got my money's worth at the expensive open bar, just drinking drink after drink until closing. I must have walked east down Houston, mistakenly, not east down Delancey as I mistakenly thought I must've done, but east down Houston to the river or to where I must have been when I finally did realize my mistake.

I make a left now, decisively.

There are people congregating outside a bar on Houston. I am tempted to buy a beer, or to at least ask someone there if they know of any baseball fields around here. But I put myself in their shoes and decide not to bother.

I reach the club, the club I remember as the club at which I lost my friends and then my memory. I face east, trying to connect what I see now to what I should've remembered seeing six months ago. And what I see, as suspected, is that Houston St. does indeed look very much like Delancey St. Though there is no obvious indication of a bridge in the distance, as there is on Delancey, Houston's slight upward slope adds its own slight element of mystery: the mystery as to where it leads, as to what can be seen from the point at which its uphill slope comes down. I sympathize with my drunken self, with all drunks suddenly, so easily mistaken and misled, so quick to mistake one busy street with another more familiar busy street, so helplessly foolish, lost.

But so then there's the bridge again, extending to the river. From here I can see clearly that this road I'm on, Houston St., however still sloping mysteriously upwards, runs not into but merely parallel to the bridge. I question how even my worst drunken self could've failed to notice what seems to me now so obvious. On a whim, or attempting to channel my drunken self, I make a right for Delancey and the bridge, only a block or two from the intersection of Houston and FDR.

I cut through an apartment complex called Baruch Houses and find myself again at the intersection of Delancey and FDR.

I wonder if, maybe, it hadn't been baseball dirt, after all. Or maybe it had, but not from a baseball field. Like a pile of baseball dirt on the side of the road somewhere...

So I hurry back along Delancey, looking for a pile of dirt, hoping something jogs my memory, remembering yet again how I'd told her, "I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!", the memory of her telling me that that's what I'd told her being one of my favorites. And I know I must really have been on a bridge at some point that night because I wouldn't have lied to my then-girlfriend when I also told her, also according to her, that I'd crossed the bridge already but was hurrying back to meet her, this just approximately half an hour before claiming to have jumped off it for her,

telling her, “I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!”, allegedly having been on the line with her all that time, she directing me out of death, she pleading with me to call a cab or stay where I am so that she could come and get me.

“I crossed the bridge, baby!”

“I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!”

And I recognize the spot. Not the pile of dirt on the side of the road, but the spot on the ramp leading up to the bridge off of which I vaulted myself over the side and onto the sidewalk, an eight foot drop about, landing first on my feet and then on my ass, then talking a cab driver out of giving me a ride home for free, from my ass, too sore to get up immediately, sore not just from the landing on my ass but from also the last four or so hours of drunkenness spent circling the space between the club and the bridge, looking for somewhere to take a piss, and then storming back and forth across the bridge, too proud to accept a ride, especially for free, especially from such a kind cab driver and offered out of pity, when it was I who was strong enough to stay out the longest on this great annual tradition amongst friends, I strong and brave enough to take care of myself after they’d all left me alone to walk home over the bridge and through the neighborhoods in my borough across the bridge they would be too scared to walk through even during the day, alone or accompanied, man enough to pick myself up from my ass, hold my liquor, and find my way to my then-girlfriend’s apartment that was only twelve blocks from the club anyway, a twelve minute walk, or three minute run, so no thank you very much.

And then getting out of the cab, my then-girlfriend helping me out of the cab outside her apartment, me tipping the cabbie who’d offered and then insisted on the free ride, tipping him everything left in my wallet, he looking at me, concerned, me laughing, unconcerned, because what’s two more twenties on New Year’s Fucking Eve? and my then-girlfriend asking if I’d remembered to tip, and me shrugging and she saying she’s mad at me, I scared her to death, and me laughing, passing out immediately in her bed only to wake up the next morning to later find on my best dress shoes what else but baseball dirt.

And being at the baseball field that night I’d almost died, perhaps later on that night in my drunken dreams, watching my friend who’d left

the country already climb a tall chain-linked fence, too tall for any of us to climb, and run off with the last of the whiskey.

It's 1:50 am.

An inflatable whale is left out on the street like old furniture. I think about deflating it and fitting it into my sweatshirt pocket, or else carrying it over my shoulder like a wet towel. But tonight, I exercise restraint. I walk on. I pass what's got to be a little girl and her father carrying his laundry home, way past her bedtime. I can't help but smile and imagine the little girl asking her father what someone like me could be doing wandering around under the Williamsburg Bridge at this hour with such a stupid smile on his face. I laugh a little to myself, even.

And but then I realize – I'm realizing a lot! – I can just look for the field from the bridge, from above! I could see the whole lower east side from up there. I'd be sure to find the field.

I hurry up the ramp, feeling raindrops. I look both ways.

The way the lights are, I have two shadows. They meet at my feet and form an acute angle. It's like they're chasing each other, chasing myself. This seems important, though I'm sure I'll never find out or be able to explain why.

Upon intersecting FDR Dr. from above, the pedestrian passageway forks off. I check both sides. From the south side, I see nothing, just apartment complexes, FDR Dr., and the riverbank flush with forestry. On the north side, I get in the way of bikers biking over the bridge, bartenders in Brooklyn, chasers of the uncatchable, or professional bikers, all of them.

The evening view is almost exactly the same as it is from the south side. The Baruch Houses, FDR Dr., and a wide, dark riverbank with just a bit less trees.

I remember how I never made it to the riverbank on the north side, how I'd turned in from Houston still a few blocks from FDR. I scan the riverbank for signs of a baseball field, but it's just too dark to see. I try to judge whether the size of the gaps between the heavy shadows (trees) are large enough for ball fields.

Unable to judge, back down the ramp I go, to get a closer look. By now, it's raining too hard to walk all that way home across the bridge, anyway.

Back I am at the intersection of FDR and Delancey, essentially the

intersection of the bridge and the river. I climb a footbridge to cross the highway. The sign on the footbridge tells me it's a two-minute walk to cross the footbridge. The sign on the other end of the footbridge says East River State Park closes at midnight.

And yet, it's as open as any park in the city.

The footbridge brings me to a wide path lined with gaslights running parallel to the river and a narrow park of some kind in between. I try to look ahead, to see how far the path runs, but can only make out so much. In any case, it runs as far as I can make out.

I pass a chain-linked fence through which I see basketball courts. I cross under the Williamsburg Bridge, and pass more chain-linked fences through which I see tennis courts. Then the fences end, and I walk off the path. I pass public restrooms. I have to piss real bad – the rain doesn't help – but I'm not comfortable walking near the building, by which desperate people I suspect might be seeking shelter. Before the river, there's a promenade parallel to and wide as the path I followed and left. East River State Park, so far, has been more concrete than grass, with steps and flower beds, multiple paths and plazas, benches and trees emerging randomly, it seems, like a series of patios between highway and river.

I'm careful not to slip in the rain or trip in the dark, also careful of patrolmen and desperate people. I see shadows now and then and try to gage their path, and then avoid that path, keeping close to the trees.

I walk around yellow caution tape beyond which I see a pile of dirt. Baseball dirt. But I don't even have time to consider whether this was the exact spot I was looking for, because through the next chain-linked fence is an actual dirt baseball field.

The chain-linked gate is open. The field is empty, so in I go.

I try to remember.

Nothing.

Nothing coming back to me.

But there is another dirt field within this same chain-linked enclosure, and so I walk towards that one, through the shared outfield grass.

In the middle of the second field's infield, I stop to look around, to try to remember. I look at the water, through the raindrops, at the Williamsburg Bridge, at the first field, the path through the chain-linked fence, and onwards. There is a gate at this end of the field, too, also open.

I am back on the path now. It still goes on as far as I can see, in both directions. I wonder if I've already passed the point where the path would hit Houston St., imagining Houston like Delancey, as a street leading onto a bridge of its own, as I must've thought that night.

I consider following a ramp on the side of the path that leads up to FDR Dr., to check where I am in relation to Houston, but the next field distracts me. Through the chain-link, I see a soccer goal, facing north, but instead of seeing a soccer field, I see a baseball diamond that is, somehow, without puddles. I slip through another open gate. The diamond is clay, like a tennis court. But also, unlike the last two dirt fields that failed to jog my memory, this clay diamond faces the riverside fence directly, so that the outfield is shallowest to dead centerfield.

The view, I must add, is incredible. The rain over the bridge over the river, together with the ambient light of "the city that never sleeps" and the lights from the bridge and from the promenade and now lightning, make rainbow blotches.

I think of my friend climbing this fence before the river, and I remember rainbow blotches there, too.

And I think of the fireworks I watched as a kid.

And I keep going. And I think I find the field I've been looking for, the field that is both the unknown field emerged from my unconsciousness and the field on which I found myself the night I almost died.

The field is identical to the clay diamond I'd just passed, except that the diamond on this field is dirt.

There are bleachers on either side. I want to sit down, but I think of the lightning and thunder, of the bleachers' conductive nature.

"Don't worry, Mom!" I want to shout. "I love life too much!"

Instead, on a whim, I sit down in front of the bleachers, in a young, invisible puddle between two deeper, more obvious ones. I observe the path of the Williamsburg Bridge amongst the rainbow blotches and imagine the right field line extending through the fence and over the river, meeting the bridge invisibly somewhere on the other side, maybe at my apartment.

Then I picture my friend climbing the fence on the other side of the field, one hand holding the last of the whiskey, the other doing all the climbing work. The two images are not an exact match, but how could they

possibly be?

I try to remember coming here the night I almost died, but my only memory of a field from that night is of that morning remembering my friend climbing a field from another night. So I just don't know. The dirt was just as likely to have come from either of the first two dirt fields, too. I need to find Houston St. Also, the longer I sit in the water, the more I increase the risk of ruining my phone.

So I get up, I speedwalk down the path, and I speedwalk up the ramp by the clay diamond.

And there I am, right at the intersection of FDR and Houston.

So I speedwalk back down the ramp, except that I stop halfway, this time better understanding what I see.

I see an open Park, grass to piss on, bleachers to sit on. And I see the bridge like a rainbow beltway or galaxy over the river, over which, as the rainbows dim, the sun will rise.

And I am drunk again, forgetting everything, forgetting my friends, drunk again on the weightlessness of zero responsibility. I clasp the fence and gaze out, eyes rainy with praise, eyes reflecting the reflecting pools of Mecca. I have to piss so bad I run out onto the field and just let wail a lightning bolt. Rainbow has never looked so golden, and Brooklyn, on the other side of that bridge, never so heavenly. I want to run to Delancey and Clinton, and up onto the pedestrian passageway, and up into the sky amongst those lights, over everything, a victory march into the dawning of a new age ruled under a new set of half-year resolutions, all enacted to prevent what happened before from happening again too soon. My friend sitting atop the fence tosses me the last swig of the whiskey and hops off onto the other side, disappearing as the bottle shatters. And I realize it's not really him, but everyone who's ever left me, my then-girlfriend, my friends I'd been with that night. And that all I'd been doing at the park that night was looking for something familiar, a familiar face or familiar place that would bring back memories of familiar faces, anything to connect me with reality and remind me who and where I was. Something like the Williamsburg Bridge. And so, I feel I must have thought, in my drunken delirium, that night, logically, in a sense, if not impractically, what better way to find the bridge than to first find the river?

I take my phone out of my pocket and sit for a moment.

I sat for a moment expecting the sun to come over the river at any moment, admiring everything, the bridge and everything. I wished everyone who'd ever abandoned me would return, and bear witness with me what I've found, or was about to see, what I would see alone but couldn't have found without them.

There was still one way to top this.

You could hike to heaven the long way home. You could. You could do anything on a whim, in your health, with what little you have to do tomorrow. You could get off your ass, pass through the chain-linked fences where they opened, walk the footbridge, climb the ramp to watch the sunrise, come down to tell the world, leap over the rail for your baby, and if you fall on your ass again, roll away from the erratic light that will be from the flashlight of a patrolman approaching you, roll to where you can, from where you lie for cover in the mud, away, to watch your now-girlfriend sleep like an angel, her back to you, in her cocktail dress from the night she wants only to forget.