

The Phoenix Within

A(nother) personal nonfiction story

The 6 train rhythmically barrelled towards Pelham Bay Park, the terminus for the subway train line in the Bronx. I was riding it to a place I was not unfamiliar with, but far from being just a mundane same-old-thing visit. The destination was a bit further up north than the train reached: the community of City Island. The neighbourhood that, probably because of the small island it was on, indeed, despite being politically part of NYC by ways of the Borough of The Bronx, felt like a small town away from the city. And I had chosen to visit there to celebrate me finishing 12th grade, effectively graduating my high school at long last. And hey, it was a Friday, so yay me.

As student Metrocards had 3 rides daily, and I used one, and the free transfer it had, I decided to save the 2nd ride because who knew how long I would be at City Island. So thus I embarked on the medium-long bit distant road north that was the Pelham Parkway, which wound northwards past Pelham Bay Park, and, upon reaching the Pelham Bay Bridge, became Shore Road, the Pelham Bridge Road, becoming Shore Road again until it terminated in the nearby Westchester County neighbourhood of New Rochelle, which I have been to several times. Upon crossing the bridge, I turned right, as the directional sign demarcated, to City Island. I crossed the City Island Bridge, which formed City Island Road, the main road, and thus a vital artery of sorts, to the town. At that time, the old bridge was removed, and the new one was being built. In the meantime, all traffic, vehicular, and pedestrian, used an interim bridge. While the road part of the bridge was solid in order to handle heavy vehicles, the narrow pedestrian footpath felt shaky, and fragile. I admit that I was worried I was going to sleep with the fishes several times while walking it, but a bicyclist speeding by assured me that the temporary footpath was fine, and I trudged on with confidence. After a rather rickety walk, I finally made it.

City Island has modernised rapidly for the better since then. In a recent visit back to the place, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the new permanent bridge was finally finished, and open, with a wide, and not-rickety footpath. The untended grass-filled lot fenced off by chain-links, which greeted you when you stepped afoot onto the island, has since been paved, and redeveloped into a public recreational space waterfront with park benches, akin to the waterfront of Erie Basin Park, a dog park in the neighbourhood of Red

Hook, Brooklyn, which had the IKEA Dock (named after the eponymous retailer that took space next to the park), which served a ferry that whisked you off to Wall Street, downtown Lower Manhattan. I duly noted the changes to City Island, and was glad it was changing for the better.

As previously mentioned, I was no stranger to City Island. The first time I went, I never actually set foot on there, and settled for Orchard Beach north of the opposite side of the water from City Island. It was Thursday 11th December, 2014. The second time I went, I actually made it. It was 6 months later, on Wednesday 10th June, 2015. I made it to the New York Public Library, before calling it quits by there, due to the bus stop for the Bx29 being there. The last time, I made it all the way to the end of City Island Road, determined to explore the whole Island.

I will never forget that day, and date I went on that little trip: Friday, 9th June, 2017, because of the connotation that that day, and that trip carried.

Indeed, at first glance, it looked like an ordinary little trip. It was a rather, at first sight, uneventful trip that happened on a normal, uneventful day, with no event especially noteworthy occurring that day. And indeed I just simply walked around, hung out by the waterline, and mundanely took the bus back home. If you only see the surface of things, then yes, it is beyond a shadow of doubt nothing but an ordinary trip, for the true worth was not from what was without, but from what was within.

For behind the obvious was a load of dark, and heavy emotional baggage, and the personal rediscovery journey.

See, I was enrolled at a high school I opposed, as it cost tuition, and I worried that our financially frail state meant that tuition would consume money that could be put to use for more urgent matters, such as rent. However my mother didn't listen because she believed (and still believes...) that I can't take care of myself (ugh...), and sent me to there. It was less of a school, and more of a shelter. My financial concerns were proven right in the end, but that's a story for next time, I suppose. I guess I could've forgiven the tuition, and the financial burden it placed upon us if the school had exceptional standards, but it was far from the truth. Pretty much the only respectable students were the international students, who were enrolled there because their parents didn't know better. Apart from a few really good ones (enrolled out of the same naïveté that prompted the international students' parents to enrol their children here), pretty much all of the American students were only here because they

were staff's children, or were expelled from public school because of bad, sometimes borderline illegal - pretty much illegal behaviour, as after all, my old High School is a shelter, as previously mentioned. And the teachers were, for the most part incompetent. As it was not a public school, the teachers didn't need certification, and so often didn't know what they were teaching, with some of the teachers straight up admitting that they were college students who only took the teaching job up to pay off their debt, and that it was the office that told you what you teach. The only standard you needed to have to get hired was to say that you are a Christian.

Even then, the crappy school wouldn't have ruffled my feathers too much, but the darkest, most painful emotional burden came from home. My father had run us aground, so my mother sent him off to China hoping that he'd be able to send us money from there. He did - for 4 years. Then he was back to being useless. Since then on, he hasn't, and still hasn't, sent any money recently.

After my father left, was when the thread really unravelled, so to speak, when my family collapsed. My sister got tired of our hardship, and started to lash out, while my mother lashed back. In this dysfunctional family, I was the one who became the designated medium keeping everyone together. Because I feared injury, I ended up taking on the role of the reclusive figure alongside being a parental figure which entailed being the said designated medium. The reality of my innocence cruelly ripped from me is made cruelly ironic when you take in the fact that I am the youngest member in my family.

There was no more reason I could see to be who I really was. When 10th grade came around, I caught a nasty cold that struck me with a sore throat. Despite having to rest up, I was compelled to speak during class, which messed with the healing process. When I finally got well, the damage was done: my voice permanently deepened until years later. But I stopped caring. Rather than seek to properly restore my throat to its original condition, I just casually rolled with it and spoke with a deepened voice for the rest of high school until I took it upon myself to actively raise the pitch back up. It's back to before now, and then some.

But the deepened voice was not the only thing that was a result of my apathy. I adopted a fake personality that reeked of said apathy. I spoke in a more deadpan voice to reflect my attitude. And, of course, I didn't bother to hide the fact, let it be obvious, that I just didn't care, no, not anymore.

Slowly but surely, everything I loved, and all the passionate love I had for those things drained away. They dried, and dried up, until nothing was left. Absolutely nothing. Surviving high school, making it out alive in one piece, was all that only ever mattered now. I was now a dead husk of my former self, just a bland machine that robotically did daily routine like the dry stiff I now was, as demonstrated with me going to school on days I didn't even have to.

They say time can be slowed down or sped up by the mind's perception. It seems they're right, for high school is 4 years, but for me it felt like a decade. Although it was clear to myself at first that it was all just an act, I was wearing the mask so much that I started to slowly, but surely, believe that it was the real me, that it was who I am. Towards the end of 12th grade, however, things started to change for the better. It was then did the self-rediscovery journey that helped me return to who I am, that helped me drop the mask, began.

Although it was only a little bit at a little time, it gradually increased, and increased. Alongside the increase of self-discovery itself came the rate of it. As I slowly rediscovered myself, I was rediscovering more of myself every time I underwent a session. And my trip to City Island was a hallmark of when it really took off. I finally displayed an external sign of a return to my previous self by a small act, but nevertheless an act, of mindfulness.

Once again, I didn't need to go to school, having finished all my tests. But I knew my mom wouldn't let me go out on my own (it was a long while before she was forced to let me go), so I said I had a final test. But the biggest sign of mindfulness was going to City Island without even needlessly stopping at the school. Like a Phoenix, I was reborn from a flame, a flame that also cleansed myself of the fake identity I had assumed so much I assumed it was who I really was. The rebirth within was truly a catharsis of every sense of the word: the fierce flame that burned away all the bullshit that my life was full of, and the real self that arose from the said flame, and ashes, fully purified.

I wish I could say that life became easier after high school. I wish I could've said many things about my life post-high school, almost all of them good, positive, sweet, beautiful, sunshine-y, and cuddly. But it couldn't be further from the truth. I continued, and still continue, to struggle. It remains a battle that I had to fight, not a battle against the evils itself, but a battle against the legacy the evils left on my life.

But what was most important was that I fought them battles as myself. After all, if they were going to be my battles, why not fight them as myself, as who I really am? So thus facilitated the importance of the rebirth.

This event wasn't the beginning of my rebirth, and it most certainly wasn't the end. It was when things started to get really exciting.

Soon, I was going to be free from the dark chains of high school. Soon, I was free to go out into the world. I will be free to explore, and be, just simply be, who I really am. Whom I always was supposed to be.

I reached one of the beaches around the island. It was probably due to the fact that City Island was in the western end of the Long Island Sound where the East River ended, but the waters were calm. No violent wave crashing. Just calm sloshing of tiny waves against the waterline. Little snails crawled about in the sand. And, most remarkably of all, Horseshoe Crabs were there. It seems that they were taking advantage of the calm waters to lay eggs in the beach's sand.

I waded about as I looked out pensively, thinking about all the struggles I managed to overcome, into the Sound, where people were boating about not too far away on the calm waters. Wading about with no violent wave crashes to worry me about being knocked over, and be swept away, I easily lost myself into my thoughts. And I thought about my present situation. Thought about my past, what I've become, and will become as I metamorphosed within. And I, for the first time in a long while, was happy.

Later on, I took the bus home, as I had planned. I remarked to myself how the walk between Pelham Bay Park and City Island was 45 minutes, yet the bus ride that sped past all the paths I walked on was 15. As I watched the landscape blur past as the bus sped to the train station, I thought it was worth it. It was all worth it. The next day, graduation commenced.

I sometimes catch myself looking back upon the memory, and I ponder deeply about it. About what happened. About what I became. About what my life became because of the journey. About all the emotional, and mental, renewal. And I thank that moment for being a catalyst that told me that I was ready to take off like a rocket into the sky, never to look back at what I left behind so that I can confidently, and fully embrace what was coming to me for making the choice of re-discovery, a journey that would stretch a span of years to come.

But in the moment, all that really mattered was that the Phoenix within that was me chose to rise from the ashes to boldly be who I want to be. And so I looked ponderously into the horizon, taking a deep, soulful look upon the new possibilities that awaited me on the horizon far ahead of, and far above me.

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