

The Riverfront

I spent most of the summer after my freshman year of college visiting my boyfriend, Benton, in Hoboken, New Jersey. The mile and a quarter square city (2 miles square, if you count what's underwater down by the riverfront) is a combination of expensive condominiums, shops, restaurants, parks, landmarks, and campus grounds for Steven's Institute of Technology pressed up against each other that forms a neat little grid on New Jersey's map. The main strips like Washington Street, which are perpendicular to the train terminal that runs along the bottom of Hoboken, are filled with business. Benny Tudino's, home of the plus size slice of pizza (about double the size of one's face) and Stacks Pancake House can be found there alongside market places dating back to post-World War II, when the city was mostly inhabited by Puerto-Ricans.

I didn't feel as small there or as claustrophobic as I did in all my visits to NYC. The people still walked quickly, and I still struggled to keep up with the pace, but the faces I saw were friendlier. They'd smile and nod as I passed them on the street. With over 50,000 people in the area, many of them with cars, there was little parking space to be had. So I commuted to my boyfriend via train alongside businessmen with clean haircuts and NYC-bound tourists with cameras hanging around their necks.

I arrived around 10:30 pm every Saturday at the NJ Transit Hoboken train station, where he would be waiting for me. The terminal was foul-smelling and hot, but the waiting room beyond the boarding platforms had a charm that outweighed the grimy, city feel. My boyfriend was always this way, too, when I arrived: sweaty and smelly after a long day of working in the heat, but embracing him was more than worth getting a whiff body odor and a smear of dirt on me.

Sometimes it was just the two of us walking home for the evening along Sinatra Drive. Other times, the tree-adorned sidewalks and grassy piers were still lively with partiers from the bars along the riverfront. Several times we even encountered long lines of people outside the tall W hotel across the street from the apartment complex, where famous soccer teams happened to be staying. There was no pattern or consistency with which the riverfront decided to have company, save for us; its consistency lay in the ever present, but never overpowering humidity, breeze, and scent coming off the Hudson River.

The smell of tobacco was a constant, too. The Lenape called the city the “land of the tobacco pipe” when there was still soapstone near the Hudson to carve pipes into, but Hoboken was home to a variety of smoking methods by the time I arrived. People on the piers would sit on benches and light a cigarette or vape, looking out at New York City across the water while exhaling clouds of smoke through their mouths and noses. Party boats passed often. Some had strobe lights and loud music. Others had softer music and string lights. We took in all of this too, albeit 21 floors above the other smokers. We sat on the balcony every night with a lit cigar and boat watched. He always held it between his index and middle finger while we talked, occasionally flicking the underside of the cigar to let any ash that had built up on the burning end fall. I never held it at all, being asthmatic and unable to handle the smoke directly, but my lack of participation in that respect mattered little to him or the Hudson. We were all merely enjoying each others’ company.

As my relationship with him grew fonder and stronger, I found myself in Hoboken for longer periods of time. I began leaving Tuesday mornings right after he clocked in for work at the Italian sandwich shop on Washington Street instead of on Sunday evenings after dinner. We

spent less time cuddled up in the apartment and more out on the streets, especially with the release of the mobile app “Pokemon GO.” Sinatra and Pier C parks became more than friends we lounged around with during the hot, humid summer days; they evolved into a hub for catching Pokemon and obtaining items to help us do so. The riverfront was more than the friend that walked me too and from his apartment by late summer when he invited me over on an off weekend. It had become our new daily companion.

The off weekend was one when I was not planning on visiting. Benton had arrangements to go paint-balling with some old friends Saturday through Sunday, and I was scheduled to have my wisdom teeth removed that Tuesday. Earlier during the week he had sent me a text message saying he had a gift to give me, and he didn’t want it to wait until after I had recovered from surgery. He said he could free his schedule for Monday. More than happy to be able to see him that week rather than not at all, I hopped on the train that Monday morning -- my salvation on Saturday’s and damnation on Tuesdays, but today it was both -- with excitement.

It was partially sunny, partially cloudy in Hoboken that day. It was especially humid, even for early August, and despite the heat, the piers were bustling with people on lunch-break. People sat beneath trees and at benches with tupperware filled with salad and sandwiches wrapped in tinfoil. The waves of the Hudson were rowdy, as if teeming with nervous energy.

Benton took me to Pier A instead of immediately to the apartment, claiming he wanted to show me something down there. I followed, thinking nothing of it; perhaps he’d found something cool in the twisted sculptures scattered around the park, or some sort of wildlife he’d spotted on his way over to the train station. Neither of my guesses were correct. As he brought

me to the end of Pier A where the Hudson River crashed against the stone, he took something out of his pocket. Small, silvery metallic -- a ring.

That piece of the riverfront remains on my ring finger to this day, still rich with the promise of eternal companionship.