



Notes on a Prologue: The Shattered Bridge

April 2012: Upstate New York—I hold the phone up to my face to film two girls on a tiny screen. Our daughters, five and three years old, woke up demanding attention, demanding to be taken care of, and have commenced to bouncing on the bed. My wife tries to settle them down. I hold the phone steady.

“Repeat after me: ‘I am having a wonderful childhood.’ ”

They say it, huffing, the younger one trails behind a syllable or two.

“Now say, ‘You’re a great dad.’ ”

I confirm the clip is saved and look up. I wonder if they will remember.

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December 2012: Upstate New York—I sit on the couch, laptop attached to my thighs, and scramble to grade the last of my students’ papers. The girls sit next to me and watch *Dora the Explorer*, spellbound.

To a sleep-deprived adult, *Dora the Explorer* feels a dream or hallucination, one butterfly ball or tiara party after another. In our house, Dora’s voice signals the end of the day. While dinner cooks on the stove in the kitchen, in the other room unicorns are rescued, magical mirrors run into, and mermaids are lost and found.

This episode of *Dora the Explorer* is called "Te Amo." A mean magician has cast a spell, and Dora and her friends must fix a Shattered Bridge to get to the other side. To do this, they must scream "Te amo," *I love you*, at the top of their lungs.

"Te amo! Te amo!" the girls shout, still sucking their thumbs.

I shout with them. "Te amo! Te amo!"

"Stop being silly," Miriam, the older girl, says to me, scolding.

"Yeah," Beatrice, the younger girl, chimes in. "Stop being silly!"

"All right," I say. "I'll stop."

The Shattered Bridge gets fixed.

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Notes on a Prologue, with Cameo from Billy Squier

Some hot July nights, the air itself seems eager for the day to end. This was such a night, in 2013, on the South Shore of Long Island.

My wife's mother lives in a 200-year-old farmhouse on the outskirts of Bellport. We arrived that night in time for a swim, a late supper, and an abbreviated story time with our daughters. The pool filter hummed in the yard. I grew restless.

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I have tricked out my car with a stereo that is so loud it is capable of shaking the rear-view mirror. I installed a subwoofer, precision-made tweeters, and an amplifier with 300 watts of digital power because I have my own car after 20 years without one. I also did it because, since entering middle age, I need a sanctuary to blast music and drown out the distorted thoughts that preoccupy my mind. The stereo is loaded with sentimental pop, power ballads, hardcore punk, Schubert lieder. Inside the car, I am 17 again. Inside the car, I blast music and sing along.

I thought about going out for a drive.

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I turned on the TV. A commercial for a rock festival announced that Billy Squier was set to play in two hours.

Billy Squier! I have fucking loved Billy Squier since eighth grade. He was a friend of the members of Queen, my favorite rock

band, which has always been a bonus. Even without that connection, I regarded Billy Squier as the American T. Rex, the way he made hard rock sound like pop and pop sound like hard rock. From the day I heard “The Stroke” pop out of the speakers on my FM radio, I was hooked.

Thirty years later, Billy Squier qualified as a genuine recluse. His post-“Stroke” story goes like this: a rock star on top of the world has a flop video, then disappears. “Rock Me Tonite,” a 1984 synth-heavy single infamous for its unintentionally camp video, drives Squier to pull a Syd Barrett and drop out of the music business.

I don’t remember it quite that way, but the video was pretty bad: Squier sports a shoulder-cut *Flashdance* shirt and writhes around on pink satin sheets. People at the time called it “Cock Me Tonite.” The thing is, Squier didn’t quit; he kept at it for more than a decade, and I remained a loyal fan. Lots of people still loved him. It was only after Squier put out an acoustic album in 1998 that he truly went off the radar.

There were hints of what he was up to. If you picked up a free flyer from Gotham Writers’ Workshop in New York City, you’d read a blurb from “singer and songwriter” Billy Squier raving about the draft of a screenplay he completed taking classes there. Other than the occasional solo gig announced on his website, not much was going on.

I got in my car and followed the GPS lady’s directions.

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Hands down, it was the worst organized show I’ve ever attended. I have been to arena shows with bathrooms six inches deep in water, where women used urinals standing on buckets. I have seen skinheads form chains to keep teenagers inside mosh pits. I have slept on dirt at a folk festival where the only available

food was a dry vegan sheetcake. This gig seemed designed to fall apart. There were no signs to anything, anywhere. People were anxious to see the full line-up of bands, waiting in a ticket line that went down the block.

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Billy Squier opened the evening part of the festival. I heard his first song, “In the Dark,” while still waiting in line. I spotted a couple people in Billy Squier t-shirts behind me, shaking their heads. As soon as I got my ticket, I bolted past the fried bread trucks and Deadhead trinket stands, broke through the beer line, and navigated around picnic blankets that held people’s spots for when the Doobie Brothers went on.

And there he was: Billy Squier! He was doing “She’s a Runner,” a fave ballad from *Emotions in Motion*. I clapped along with the hundred or so people standing in front of the stage.

And then he did a song from his acoustic album, *Happy Blue*. I bought when it came out, but didn’t listen to it that much. “I’m going to play ‘The Pursuit of Happiness,’ ” he said. “It’s from an album that went nowhere.”

He seemed kind of sad. I resolved to listen to the song, give it my full attention, rather than make off to get a beer or check my email. This time the song sounded different. He was playing on an acoustic, but it was loud and distorted. He knocked behind neck and let the open strings feed back.

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Most people I know nowadays would think the song is cheesy, or think Billy Squier is cheesy. Most people look to music to validate their tastes, rather than simply react to what they hear. Whatever. After he sang “If you want love/you gotta love somebody/If you wanna be happy/stand in line,” I was on the verge of

tears. In my memory now, I feel some weight lifted from my chest as he played it.

This all sounds like a cheap epiphany scene from a bad film. I know this.

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He left the stage abruptly. The sound guy was probably asleep, and so he didn't turn down his guitar before Billy Squier unplugged it. It sounded a *ka-chung* across the crowd. The set was short. It was a rock festival and all, with different acts and a couple of stages, but it seemed like he was on stage for only a half-hour. Who cares, I thought. I got to see Billy Squier. He had opened for Queen in 1982 when I was 14. My mother wouldn't let me go without an escort. To finally see him 30 years later felt like one door shutting and another opening.

No way was I going to stay for what came next, some Doobie Brothers bullshit. I posted photos to share my joy, then got lost trying to leave. At one point, I stood under an empty tent closed-in on three sides. A teenaged security guard talked to some girls through the fence.

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On the ride home, I kept the stereo off. The voice of the GPS lady led me back to my mother-in-law's house. My cell phone rang. It was my sister. She usually texts me because I never answer my phone. So I answered.

She was crying. Sobbing. My sister never cries. I asked her what was wrong.

She kept sobbing.

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I thought about Charlie, my nephew and her oldest son, who fancied himself the Longboard Magellan of South Jersey, skating beside highways and inside stadium parking lots. Maybe he'd gotten in some disfiguring accident. I thought of my middle nephew, Johnny, in remission five years from brain cancer and rounds of chemo. His annual tests were up. And I thought of our mother, her pack-a-day habit since we were young, each x-ray miraculously unmarred by dark lungs. It was Mom. Mom was sick. I braced myself.

"Dad died," she said. "He died."

I pulled the car over. It wasn't relief I felt. It also wasn't shock. Instead, I asked practical questions, the when, the how, the why. The turn signal ticked. Patchogue traffic whooshed by.

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I drove the rest of the way back, again in silence, no stereo, no voice to give me direction.



Notes on Maple Shade

In the small hours of June 12, 1950, two black males from Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania went out for a ride in the country with their dates. They pulled off Route 73 in Maple Shade, New Jersey, and stopped at Mary's Café on Main Street. It was 12:45 a.m. They sat down to be served. The waitress ignored them. The two men walked up to the bar and ordered four beers. Ernest Nichols, a German immigrant and the bar's owner, stood behind the counter. The "best thing," he said, "would be for you to leave." They refused, and sat back down at their table. This incensed Nichols.

"I want you out of here!" he shouted. Nichols then took out a pistol from under the bar; other accounts say it was a shotgun. "I'd kill for less!"

He chased them out to the parking lot. He fired into the roof; other accounts say he shot into the South Jersey sky. The four left, frightened, then got angry, and drove down Main Street to the Maple Shade police station to file a complaint, which all four signed: Pearl E. Smith and Doris Wilson, who listed their occupations as teacher and policewoman, along with the two young seminarians from Pennsylvania: Walter R. McCall and Martin Luther King, Jr.

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They returned to the bar with the police and Nichols was arrested. The Camden chapter of the NAACP filed suit. The case was

dismissed three months later, however, when witnesses at the bar—three white Penn students—refused to testify after pressure from their parents.

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Some biographers categorize the incident in Maple Shade as an epiphany for the 20-year-old King, as much of a formative influence on his teachings of direct action as when he visited Gandhi's birthplace in 1959 and developed a belief in non-violent resistance. A few designate Mary's Café as the birthplace of the modern civil rights movement in America.

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From ages 2 to 19, I lived in "The Shade," as we called it, 3.8 square miles on the southern end of Burlington County, nine miles from Philadelphia, a "suburban community located between two large shopping malls," the town's Historical Society brochure reads. Maple Shade was and remains a working class town hemmed in by larger, richer towns—new money communities Cherry Hill and Mount Laurel have median household incomes well above 50 percent more than Maple Shade's, old money Moorestown more than double. There are other blue-collar areas in South Jersey—Gloucester, Vineland, parts of Camden and Pennsauken—but perhaps because of its location, Shaders are especially leery of outsiders. *There's a carload of dudes from Cinnaminson at the custard stand*, an older boy would say as he smoked cigarettes on Steinhauer Hill. *Let's go beat the shit out of them!*

Between Main Street and Forklanding Road, its delis and sub shops, barbers and bakeries, churches and baseballs fields, Shaders kept to themselves.

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Sundays after mass in 1950, the same summer King and his friends were thrown out of Mary's Café, my grandparents went on drives from their house in Northeast Philadelphia. My mother told my sister and I the story of how, as a three-year-old, she sat in the backseat with her grandmother and crossed the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge, past Camden, past what is now Palmyra and Cinnaminson, to look at houses in Maple Shade Township, just formed in 1947. To their left and right, they saw farms and forest for miles. They looked out onto peach orchards and dairy farms, out of which quarter-acre plots would be carved for small houses, and called this land "God's Country."