

The railroad tracks reach back to South Shore from just about everywhere I've ever been: on an Amtrak train crossing the Hell Gate Bridge on the approach to Penn Station in New York City; on an airplane passing over sidings and spurs on the descent into Pittsburgh, Barcelona, or Wuhan; in my apartment in Brookline, Massachusetts, from which you can see and hear the D Line trains running behind the houses across the street. All the tracks connect to all the other tracks, and if you know the way you can ride them back to Bryn Mawr Station, 71st and Jeffery, and home.

I get off a southbound Illinois Central train at Bryn Mawr and walk the wrong way, west, to the end of the raised open-air platform that just ends, with no stairs leading down to street level. Everyone else who got off the train walks the other way, east, through the doors into the station house that in cold weather smells of steam and piss, and in hot weather of dust and sun-heated wood. The arriving passengers will go through the turnstiles in the station house and outside again through another set of doors, down the stairs, and into the middle of the intersection. That's the way out, the way you're supposed to go. My way, the wrong way, the secret way, feels to me like the way in—into the landscape, into South Shore.

The boards of the platform give a little beneath my sneakered feet. The wood has weathered unevenly—dry and splintered in some places, wearing into moist bluntness in others. Reaching the west end of the platform, I lean out for a moment to make sure there's no northbound train coming. Then I turn around, squat, put my palms on the edge of the platform's floor, lower my feet halfway to the tracks, and drop. It's not far, maybe chest height for a grown man, but I'm not full-grown yet; it feels far.

It also feels vaguely historical to drop from platform to tracks, like dropping into a seam in time. I'm old enough to know that the neighborhood, the city, has a history, but I know that history in only the vaguest terms. Once upon a time there were white kids in knickers and newsboy caps (for some reason, I see them picking up stray pieces of coal along the tracks), and before that there was prairie, like the high grass growing in vacant lots you can see from the windows of an IC train taking the turn at 71st and Stony Island. There's something unnameably industrial, and, behind that, something even more unnameably and remotely rural, about dropping to the uncertain footing of the wooden ties and weedy gravel bed between smooth rails that go out to the East Side, where the steel mills are, and extend beyond there all the way to Gary, the Dunes, the Mississippi Delta.

I squint up at the sky, a bug crawling along the neighborhood's spine. You're not supposed to linger on railroad tracks, but they're seductively intimate, private, even though they're right there in public view in the middle of 71st Street. Still, you could get mashed flat. I step over the far rail, watch for a gap in traffic on 71st, and cut across on the diagonal toward Euclid Avenue, my street. Before me, I think, there were kids who did the same thing, kids who knew the secret.

If not a train, then a bus. I get off at 69th and Jeffery. It happens only rarely that junior gangsters in pea coats and sideways Pittsburgh Pirates caps are waiting at the bus stop to mess with kids like me—white, black, they don't discriminate—who live in the Highlands, South Shore's high-rent district. But I like to be ready every time: to disappear or run, if practicable; to fight, only if I absolutely have to; or, as I prefer, to simply walk on, projecting dull purpose drained of both challenge and acquiescence, and never, ever stop, no matter what. When they come asking for a transfer or a dollar, anything to get you to stop and give in to them, you say no without breaking stride, going around them if you have to. They might walk along next to you, craning in close to your studiously blank face, double-checking—"You saying no to me, boy? What's your problem?"—but you keep going and don't bother saying it again. That's usually enough. We're all just kids, after all; I don't carry much worth taking, and they're not real gangsters yet. If you slide through, refusing to play, most of them will let it go—"Hey, I'm just playing with you"—and wait for the next candidate, the one who'll stop, which makes it more fun; the one who'll apologize when he says no, which means that he's ready to give up what he's got. You don't have to be a tough guy; you just have to seem slightly more inertial, slightly less worth the trouble, than whoever comes before or after you.

Still, there are days when I get off the bus a block or two early, or ride past my stop and get off a block later, just to mix it up and keep them off balance, to reduce traction so I can keep sliding through. It's not necessary, but I've got nothing but time to spare. I don't have anywhere I need to be.

This time I get off at my regular stop. Nobody's waiting there to mess with me. Walking home on 69th Street, I pass a garage door with a couple of gouges in it. My next-door neighbor Joe, who is a few years older than me, put them there one night. The guys on the next block, the last pack of white stoners left in the neighborhood, had a beef with Joe stemming from words exchanged one afternoon when he provoked them by swerving too close on his purple spider bike with yellow flames painted along the chain guard. They all wanted to see Joe get beat up but none of them wanted to fight him, so they brought in a ringer, a big black guy named Pierre from another part of the South Side. Joe, an American Indian adopted by Irish Catholics, was wiry and compact, hard-built from doing situps and pushups and pull-ups in his slant-eaved attic bedroom with the squirrel-infested closet. That night, we watched him go down to the corner to meet Pierre, walking with a pent-up prefight bounce and fitted out for battle: oily faded flare jeans, denim vest, no shirt, long black hair parted in the middle, a doubled length of heavy-duty chain held in one hand and draped over his shoulder. Joe disappeared from view in the dark, and a few seconds later everybody on both blocks—ours and theirs—heard a hoarse shout and then the dull chunk-chunk of his chain hitting the garage door and perhaps Pierre's body. Pierre did not stick around for an extended beating. He fled into late traffic on Jeffery, a Hector-for-hire refusing to face the Achilles of the 6900 block of Euclid.

That's Joe, not me. But the marks on the garage door offer a reminder: you don't have to slide through; you can take the hard way. In later years, after Joe loses a kidney when he and his father get shot up by home invaders who they nevertheless repel with their bare hands, Joe runs off to a reservation out West. The police ring our doorbell and tell us that if he ever turns up in the neighborhood again we should bolt the door and give them a call; they want to talk to him about a string of muggings. But he's long gone. The hard way.

My way home, most days and nights, goes through Jackson Park, the South Side's grandest and loneliest park. I'm looking out the window of a school bus grinding down Cornell Avenue, the park's main north-south drive, turning on Hayes Drive and passing the Golden Lady, the statue standing with arms upraised, copying a long-lost big sister's gesture of benediction over a city that vanished. I'm pedaling along the bike paths in slapstick fast-motion that grows less comic, more controlled as I grow older and stronger. But I'm increasingly on foot, having grown into a reedy, dreamy teenager who prefers to walk.

It's the end of another night of hanging around in Hyde Park, where most of my high school friends live, and it's time to go home. Crossing wide, empty Stony Island Avenue at 59th Street, I approach the dark tree line, choosing a place to enter the park. Beyond, deeper within the greater darkness of the park, the glow of streetlights lining the drives pinkens the sky. I pick my way through lightless groves, navigating by keeping the lights of Stony Island in view on my right and those of Cornell on my left. I hurry across Cornell, momentarily exposed, and continue south and east in woodland gloom again. I skirt the parking lot where guys cruise around in cars, sometimes with women in the passenger seat or in the back, looking for business or trouble or something else I can't provide.

Once across Hayes Drive, the Golden Lady behind me, the park feels darker, denser. I'm in long-haul rhythm, covering ground, firmly thumping my heel down on the turf with every step. I cross unlit stretches of grass and cut through narrow gaps between patches of brush, still keeping off the paved paths. I pass the locked-up marina, wondering, as always, if boats get stolen just like cars, and if joyriders crash them or bring them back. Then I cross Marquette Drive and enter the homestretch, my feet finding and following the path worn across the golf course by cross-cutters like me.

I see golfers in the daytime, and I understand that they enjoy walking around and hitting the ball and not being at their jobs, but I don't understand why there's a golf course here. It has something to do with the marina and the Golden Lady, I assume. They're historical, too. I'm grateful, in any case, for the expanse of grass and trees and water on the northern border of my neighborhood, the open territory where nobody lives, the way home.

The path crests a small hillock, drops, and runs across a flat stretch to another rise. At the far edge of the golf course, I put my hands on the top of a chest-high chain-link fence and vault over, leaving the park and continuing across 67th Street on the diagonal and down Euclid, under streetlights once more. The stately dark houses of my neighborhood, barred and grilled and burglar-alarmed, resemble a chain of frontier forts.

When I get to the high-shouldered brick house with no front door on the 6900 block of Euclid, I will remember to disarm the alarm before I unlock the door, and to rearm it once I'm in. I will find something in the refrigerator and see if there's anything on late TV, padding around the sleeping house, snug inside the castle with the drawbridge pulled up. But, really, walking down Euclid with the tight-shut houses of South Shore on either hand and the street all to myself, a freight train calling on the IC tracks in the distance, I'm already home.