

“The Longest Bridge”

I'll never forget the moment I landed at Lagoon Airport in New York City. It was late summer 1987 and I had graduated from Memphis University. I'd dreamt of this moment for God knows how long.

My uncle was waiting for me as I came out the passenger tunnel. He was with his girlfriend and I'd never been more happy to see him. I'm forever grateful he lent me his couch as I pursued my dream of making my fortune in the Big Apple.

We walked to baggage claim where I grabbed my duffle bag containing everything I owned. As we were walking to the parking lot my uncle asked me if I knew how to drive a stick shift. I'd sold my baby blue 1973 Volkswagen Beetle for my plane ticket to New York so I said of course.

My first NYC experience was my scariest...

My uncle tossed me the keys to his 1985 Toyota Corolla and told me I was driving. On the Van Wyck Expressway cars and trucks were zooming. Lights were flashing and horns blowing as if they knew I was a rookie behind the wheel.

I was as nervous as a child lying to his father while I drove in and out of traffic. My uncle kept giving me his best directions of turn here turn there. I wanted this journey to end before I had a nervous breakdown.

We pulled up to his apartment building on Southern Boulevard in the Bronx. The building was a six story walkup and my uncle lived on the fifth floor. I remember as a child the smell of apartment buildings when visiting NYC. And the smell in this building was no different.

I slung my duffle bag over my shoulder as I began my walk up five flights of stairs. The interior walls were a lime green and the building looked clean. We arrived at apartment 5B and my uncle opened the door.

When I entered the apartment the first thing I saw was a mouse running across the floor in the kitchen area. Me and mice are like Superman and kryptonite because I can't stand those little creatures. I prepared for a long night on the couch with no sleep coming my way.

The next morning the New York City lessons would begin...

My NYC cousins came by early the next morning ready and willing to show me the town. We walked to the corner bodega to get a bacon egg and cheese on a roll. This was my first encounter with the breakfast of choice for New Yorkers.

On the way back my cousin got into an argument with a stranger for walking too close to him on the sidewalk. The yelling and screaming was reaching a point to where I knew they would begin exchanging blows.

The argument subsided and with hysteria I asked my cousin what the hell happened? He said it's the way New Yorkers speak to one another and it was no big deal. And thus my first lesson was complete.

While smoking a spliff and chilling on a park bench a homeless person asked could I spare some change. My cousin told the homeless man to get lost. And gave me the greatest and most profound lesson of them all.

He told me unless you want or need something, to never look a New Yorker in the eyes. The minute you look a New Yorker in the eyes is the minute they'll try to run their game on you. Black white young old rich or poor once you make eye contact the games will begin.

We made eye contact but the lesson was priceless...

Fast forward 35 years later and the lessons my cousin taught me all those years ago still ring true today. Yes, I've gotten into screaming matches only to end up hugging my adversary a short time later. And yes, I rarely look someone in the eye unless there's an undeniable connection.

I'd left my Dominican Bakery. Where I always order an espresso coffee with two and a half sugars and a toasted croissant with butter. I shook my coffee the way New Yorkers do and leaned against the building. It was late March and the chill in the air was comforting.

I noticed him walking up the block from still quite a distance away. He wore a gray hat a reddish jacket but not bright red and some almost brand new uptown sneakers. He was smoking a cigarette and minding his business. Until the unthinkable happened and we made eye contact.

Still a ways to go I took another sip of my coffee and again our eyes caught each others. He was a pleasant looking brother with soft skin and eyes screaming for someone to hear his story. He walked right up to me and we exchanged pleasantries.

The lesson of The Longest Bridge...

We chatted about the weather and every New York sports team. His tone was serious but he had an inviting yet gentle voice. At once his facial expression changed and his words took on a more serious meaning.

He was trying to shake off something disturbing and bothersome and then he finally asked me. What's the longest bridge in New York City? For a moment I thought he was kidding but the look in eyes was as serious as a heart attack.

I started naming the obvious bridges. The George Washington Bridge, no, it's in New York and New Jersey he said. The Mario Cuomo, the Verrazano, the Whitestone were all given an emphatic NO.

He let me ramble on regurgitating the many bridges in and around New York City. Then he said, if you ask 99.9% of the people what's the longest bridge in NYC they won't know. And it's designed for us not to know. So now my curiosity is at the highest of levels and I needed to know. I must know.

He took off his hat while his face seemed to distort from anger to sadness to heartache. He came closer to me invaded my space to a point where I was about to push him away.

He then shook his head from side to side in a slow methodical way. He lit a cigarette and said, "The Rikers Island Bridge," is the longest bridge in New York City.

He then said, don't bother to Google what I told you because you'd only find the same answers you was spewing. He said, "do your research my bother," and you'll know what I'm saying is true.

When you spend years locked up in a cage you find your solace in the small victories life has to offer. He told me how he'd spent years locked up on Rikers Island over some petty nonsense. He even said he was grateful for the knowledge he gained while life passed him by.

We spoke for a while more and he shared some war stories he endured while on the Island. We gave each other a tight Bro Hug and he walked away. I did my research and found the answer to "The Longest Bridge In New York City."