

The New Jersey Pine Barons are a dense forest, not in a way that they are stupid. Though, on second thought, they are kind of stupid, in the way older brothers are stupid: constantly getting you in trouble, or leaving small scrapes and bruises on your legs and arms even though he “was just playing,” whatever Brad. Anyway, the Pine Barons are really dense. There are millions of trees growing in close proximity to one another, and being a protected National Park, no one can do a thing about it. There are minimal lakes and streams running through it. In the section of the Pine Barons I’m familiar with there are only small trails and pathways for hikers, dirt biker riders, dog walkers, stoners, and the occasional National Park Rangers to travel on. I grew up right on the forests’ edge. I loved running the trails to get in shape for soccer or lacrosse. I hate running, but the trails made it manageable. My friends and I spent all our summers traveling the winding paths. We’d use our imagination to turn the forest into...actually we just used the forest as a forest and played Man Hunt and Hide-n-Seek, I always wanted to speak up and invent a new game that turned the forest into a mythical land, but I didn’t think my friends would find that cool enough. On days we had our wits about us, we brought water and snacks and on days we let our adolescents shine through: stolen beer, wine, and tonic. Fun fact: in the early 2000s we thought tonic was an alcohol, turns out it is just very bitter water, our mistake.

The Pine Barons were my home away from home. They were for most of my neighborhood friends. Not that any of us really needed to ‘escape’ our home, because it wasn’t so terrible. Sure, my parents were divorced, but so were Miranda and Brianna’s parents. Jeremy’s Dad lost work about as often as he found it, and Zach’s mom was sick with something no one could pronounce. Other than those minor setbacks we had it pretty great. We all lived in big houses with basketball hoops out front, back yards with in-ground pools and poolside basketball hoops. We had dirt bikes and 4-wheelers, skate boards, and trampolines with basketball hoops. We were the epitome of white middle class. Our parents loved us; they even tolerated our poor choices. We once turned the steps into a giant slide with the mattresses from our rooms; which resulted in a foot shaped hole in the wall that needed repair. Another time, we decided it had snowed enough to sled off the roof; this resulted in not one, but two broken collar bones (one for Max one for Miranda). In case you’re wondering, yes, it took two separate injuries for us to stop. In the end we got the, “someone could have been paralyzed lecture,” from the collective neighborhood parents who were, apparently, all afraid of paralysis. No one knew why, but we were all curious. I really thought we were done for when we all got drunk for the first time and threw up on the back patio – all of our parents were mad, but they knew it was bound to happen sooner or later, and encouraged us to “drink on a full stomach next time.”

I can’t speak for the rest of the neighborhood kids, but I was a good student, captain of the soccer and lacrosse teams for my high school. I was also in the marching band. The band kids thought I was a jock and the jocks thought I was a nerd it was all very confusing but I loved high school because of it. Sometimes I lied about grades to make it seem like the test was hard for me too. Aside from the aforementioned traditional growing pains, I never really disappointed my parents, except for the time I did.

It took me many years to tell this story because I’m still ashamed. But, as I’ve continued on through life I’ve wondered if I am where I am today because of what happened that August day in 2004 when I tried to be the funny one and fit in. I always rode my bike home from high school through the beautiful Pine Baron trails. It was the dream. I assume it is ever kids dream to live within biking distance of their high school. If it’s not, they should reconsider their life goals. It made being a part of multiple clubs and organizations a breeze. I could come and go as I pleased, and because I lived in a neighborhood with lots of other students, I never rode alone or if I did, I always ended up passing friends hanging out or playing on the way home. In fact, that’s what happened the day I let my parents down. I was riding home like

any other day. Soccer practice had just finished. It's worth mentioning that in 2004 I was 18 years old and entering my senior year of high school. I could have driven to and from school and practice, but I preferred the exercise. I should have driven; instead I rode past a group of friends all hanging out at The Pit. The Pit was a spot in the woods that was filled with white sand so it was comfortable to sit on. I mean, it was sand, so it had its flaws, but it was the best we could do. As I joined the gang I quickly realize they were starting a bonfire. At first I did think, this is a terrible idea, it's been a dry summer. Then I thought back to Mrs. Shaner's biology class from junior year and every fire safety lesson and thought we'll be fine, sand extinguishes fire. I grabbed a spot on the sand and texted my mom. I told her I was at The Pit with some friends and will probably be home a little late. Her response was, "not too late." I knew what this meant. She was saying, 'I trust you, make good choices, come home at a reasonable hour because once school starts you're going to get really busy and I want you to be well rested,' but it was 2004 and she was terrible at texting, so I got, "not too late."

Things got off the rails pretty quickly. Once the fire was going Jeremy opened his book bag and sure enough there were two bottles of vodka. In that moment I decided I wasn't going to drink, so I didn't. There is no twist here, honestly, I did not drink. The patio incident was enough for me to learn a lesson. Sometimes I think back and wonder, maybe if I did drink I would have been more careful and more sensible; maybe the entire fall of my senior year would have been spent hanging with friends, going to football games, and concerts. I think I must have overcompensated for not drinking; I had to show I was cool in other ways.

When the bottle came my way, I didn't take a sip; I poured a shot into the cap and decided to grow the fire. I convinced everyone it was fine, I understood fire; I got an A+ on my chemistry final, and that was in June, just 2 months prior. I should have had a drink, it would have relaxed my narcotic 'have to be cool' self instead everything fell apart. In the fall of 2004 on weekdays I had to go to school, soccer, and then straight home. I had to take the bus. The bus! The dream, it was gone! I was now riding to school with freshmen. One of which asked me, "Are you nervous? I remember from orientation, the school is so big." This little rascal thought I was a freshman too! I still feel that heartbreak. On Saturday mornings I sat in fire safety school among pyromaniacs, pyro technicians and potential volunteer firefighters. We were all there to learn the same thing, the dangers of fire.

Fun fact: New Jersey is not California. California grows avocados and New Jersey grows corn and tomatoes; California borders the Pacific Ocean; New Jersey borders the Atlantic Ocean. California has beautiful people, and New Jersey has...that smell. There are other differences too, but I'll try not to be a bore. In some ways New Jersey and California are the same; they regularly vote democratic in national elections, they both have their own *Real Housewives*, and they both even have their fair share of summer droughts. Many don't realize, but in New Jersey droughts get so bad there are restrictions on washing cars and watering lawns. Weird laws too, like only even numbered houses with blue shutters can water their lawns on prime numbered days. Another thing in common, which goes hand-in-hand with the drought thing, is forest fires. Forest fires are those large fires that last for days and days taking down most of what's in its path. Most types of fires are bad. Forest fires, though, are the worst kind of fires. Plus, the little bastards are hard to put out, because they start during droughts, when water resources are limited. Fun fact: water puts out fire. Not alcohol, which is all we had with us that hot summer evening in 2004.

It started out harmless I would grow the fire little by little. I wasn't just throwing vodka onto the fire, I was creating rings around the fire so it was growing outward. I was stupid. It was stupid. I know. I got too confident, I was controlling this fire and it was the coolest. I decided it was time to make shapes of

fire in the sand like stars, hearts, and what became the demise of my senior year...a smiley face. As these designs started taking shape we started to run out of room in The Pit. In trying to add an eye to a smiley face pine needles and dry leaves on the ground caught fire. I rushed to grab sand as my friends freaked out. The fire was spreading too rapidly and too many half-drunk screaming 18 year olds were just making matters worse. I called 9-1-1 on my cell phone and all my friends left. I kept trying to cover what I could but it became hopeless and so I ran to the road too. By the time I got there, all my friends had left me. I heard the sirens approaching, and so I stayed, it was the least I could do. The fireman told me to head home anyway, turns out an 18 year old could do nothing. I hopped on my bike and peddled the remaining 5 minutes home I should have peddled 3 hours earlier. Thankfully the fire was put out within a couple hours, though I'm ashamed to say it took any hours at all.

Later that evening the fire marshal and head of police for my town knocked at the door. My cell phone number called 9-1-1 it is linked to my house and so they knew exactly how to find me. It was the same man that told me to head home when we were both at the scene, and quite frankly I think he could have mentioned that he would be popping by later. I had been trying to keep the evenings events pretty hush. It wasn't that I was lying to my mom I just played dumb as we heard all the sirens zoom down the road. Fire Marshal Kenneth Bryson filled them in. I should have done so many things differently that day, it's a day filled with regret. I admitted to the whole thing. Everyone (parents, police, fireman, etc) knew I wasn't alone in the woods playing with fire, but I couldn't give up the names of the people who were there. I'm still a hero for that, but it wasn't worth it. Except for the fact that now, 13 years later those friends still call me to vent about their husbands or kids knowing that I can keep a secret. I fell on the sword for 8 other people, and those people never forgot that.

In the end, it was an awful experience. I missed out on homecoming, movie premiers (I still haven't seen The Incredibles, Million Dollar Baby, or Oceans Twelve), I even had to give up being captain of the soccer team because I was going to miss too many practices and games over the course of the season. My coach was nice enough to still let me use it as a leadership role for college applications. I understood what happened and for the first time in my life I realized what a consequence was. Throwing up on a patio or putting a hole in a wall is just child's play compared to starting a forest fire that takes 8 townships, over 50 men, and nearly 1.8 million gallons of water (just to get an idea, that's about 240 thousand swimming pools worth of water). I know these facts because I sat through a 12 week fire safety course in the fall of my senior year of high school. I broke the law, and those 12 weeks helped keep my permanent record clean. I take full accountability for my actions that summer evening. I should not have been playing with fire, I should not have been around alcohol, but I played with fire using alcohol. I deserved what I received. The punishment affected me; I grew up in those 12 weeks. I grew up more than any of my friends. The parts I enjoyed were engaging in conversations with pyro technicians. These are the individuals who have degrees in chemistry and will help with the New Year's and Fourth of July firework shows. They, too, need to learn the ins and outs of fire safety. There were also volunteer firefighters in training. The ones that have to go out and protect our Pine Barons, my home away from home, when dweebs like me try to be too cool.

Even though I had to miss multiple life events (that today are meaningless to me) the interactions I had in that weird cinderblock classroom sent me on a journey to discover this love and passion I had for science. These elder fire people taught me it was okay to get good grades and play sports and instruments. I'm sure I would have figured this out eventually, I was always going to go to college but it was good to know being me and making the right choice was actually what was cool. Today, I work as a formulation scientist, for those who don't know, that's a scientist that does very little with fire. I develop

drugs. Fire got me into a lot of trouble once, so I try and steer clear of it. I take cold showers, and if it's above 90°F I don't go outside.