

There was a small, cold lake, and a combined-use hiking/biking trail was built alongside it. It was nothing more than a 10-foot-wide path of gravel, but it held a miracle.

It was one of the province's many beautification projects, a part of the program that turned defunct rail lines into easy-to-love walkable natural spaces. The Province of Nova Scotia acquired the railway lands in 1980, and its various councillors set about prioritizing the wellbeing of their many (or few) constituents. Big skies and grey crusher dust wove between lakes and over rivers and alongside small long-forgotten towns, and improved the moods of all who trod upon it.

The path was host to a particular sort of traffic, although there wasn't anything peculiar about it. In addition to the squirrels and the dragonflies, there were bicyclists and dog walkers. Deer and blue jays. Grief-stricken sisters and unemployed friends and troubled lovers. And some of them happened to pause at the one particular stretch of gravel—with one of the path's many benches.

These benches, these "park benches" – average and non-noteworthy, yet many and new – were installed at 500m increments along the path's more popular stretches. They were made of pressure-treated wood and anodized metal, and would each last another 25 years before needing replacement. It is among them that I first found the miracle, although I doubt I was the first to find it. For I found The Bench Where Problems Are Solved.

I walked this path, not long ago, when the bench was but a few years old, and I don't recall much more than the colour of the sky that day (it was cloudy and grey). But I wandered the path, lost in thought, and (feeling my stamina begin to drain); I found my rest at The Bench. After a sit of maybe 9 or 10 minutes, I stood and turned back toward home, not realizing that I all-of-a-sudden knew exactly what to make for dinner that night. It wasn't immediately noticeable, what power it held; inconsequential decisions and mood swaps simply became a lot easier. After a few more visits I finally recognized The Bench for what it was, and paid more careful attention to its influence, and its opportunity.

I soon avoided sitting on The Bench. I watched it instead. I'd seen an arguing couple take it and conclude their argument by way of a mutual separation. I saw, firsthand, a pair of friends whose shoulders were more relaxed by the end of their conversation. A phone call that ended in a business deal. A weeping man dry his eyes and leave.

Not everyone who sat on The Bench knew what it was, and most of the time no one had a dramatic turn of events while upon it.

But two cyclists caught on, and (after they had 6 or 7 visits which left them feeling more decisive and confident) the word began to get out. It was they, actually, who gave The Bench Where Problems Are Solved its name, and did it so concisely. They discussed divorces. Coworker conflict. Daughter drama. Lowered voices and shaking heads and middle-aged hands rubbing oily temples. They caught on to the magic in the thing, and they told a friend or two, albeit in a joking tone.

The Bench Where Problems Are Solved soon became a destination for curious tourists, a sacred space and a hallowed ground. A 68-year-old woman swore it saved her Labrador Retriever's life. Two brothers knew, deep down, that it's the only place where they can be friends again by acting their childhood selves. A homeless man smoked his last cigarette. More came.

People would mill around The Bench while they waited for it to be free. Soon enough there were very few hours in the day when it wasn't in use.

The nearest road became more traveled, and had another lane added to it. Although an accident never happened, there was always the threat of one.

Signs sprouted at the path's parking lot, at first pointing their way to The Bench, and later offering tours and photographers-for-hire. Lineups formed and the quiet cadence of the trees and the lake became filled with human voices. The province had to install more garbage cans to accommodate the Nova Scotians that had traveled (some for a couple of hours) to seek The Bench. Everyone brought at least one problem to solve.

When planes flew overhead, the passengers pressed their faces to the windows, being told over the loudspeaker that The Bench Where Problems Are Solved was passing by, 35,000 feet below.

The provincial government developed an online platform for booking time on The Bench, and therapists dominated the list.

More lighting was put in. Interpretive plaques were built. Other benches were added for the people who had to wait for The Bench. No one ever mistook it for one of the other benches.

The province's budget became balanced. Buses weren't late anymore. Doctors flooded suburbia. Nova Scotia became a shining example of modern living, and hovered near the top of "Happiest Places To Live" lists.

Hollywood screenwriters rented nearby AirBnBs just so they could fill troublesome plot holes, and physicists furthered our understanding of the material universe between quarrelling lovers.

The President of the United States brought a massive contingent of aides and photographers for a conversation with the leader of the Venezuelan authoritarian regime. They were on The Bench for a particularly long time.

Everyone sat at the The Bench Where Problems Are Solved, everyone equally; it was this way from the very start, somehow.

And the sound of nature ebbed, and the lighting and trashcans multiplied, and the traffic became excessive. But even this problem seemed to become solved, eventually—the solitude that was missed had returned, and the world spun contentedly. All of the problems were solved. Its work done, as though it were given a purpose in the first place, The Bench Where Problems Are Solved was left to enjoy a rest of its own.

The land near the stretch of path had become a bustling community, and was now packed with tasteful strip malls and upscale condos. Fast food chains and garden centres. Eventually, The Bench wasn't as visited as it was before.

Today I dug my bicycle out of the garage, and I snapped my helmet on and heard the gravel crunch beneath my wheels, and I went to The Bench Where Problems Are Solved. To where it used to be. It wasn't there anymore. It was gone.

The Rails-To-Trails program had become a major source of legitimate revenue for Nova Scotia as the appetites for living among natural surroundings became a distinct vogue among those moving to the province. The Minister of Finance spent a particularly illuminating lunch hour at The Bench to pencil that idea. The notion was to develop rural, forested Crown Land while preserving what made it so beautiful. New types of communities were born, without roads, but with communal walking paths. Trees and come-from-aways lived side by side and thrived. The terms of the sales of these parcels of land included riders that protected the paths running through them. But they didn't specify the assets installed along those paths, and that was how a man in a bulldozer flattened The Bench Where Problems Are Solved and several other benches into heaps of timber and steel. Every crumpled bench was hauled by subcontracted garbage trucks to one of the county's Waste Management Facilities, and The Bench Where Problems Are Solved was completely destroyed; its splintered remains and its empty patch of path offering no new wisdom or consolation.

It was more than a few days before anyone noticed its disappearance. The foreman of one of the new Natur-hoods™ and his tangly-haired 15-year-old daughter were the first to find the

empty space, as I find it myself, bike beneath me and another grey sky above. I'd have expected to feel shock or mourning, confusion or panic—the tangible feeling of dread or loss... but the realization that The Bench was gone forever brought with it only an overall sentiment of unease.

This news spread around the world much faster, and we all felt the same collective hollowness. This unease brought with it one particular sentiment that was entirely expected: we all felt the vacuum that this precious gift left. The implication. Books were written, NFTs were sold, and holy men sang sermons from their pulpits and podcasts. Children asked about The Bench as they were put to bed.

The Bench Where Problems Are Solved is gone, and as before, we're on our own.

One of the first questions to be raised was whether we needed a new Bench built. There was no clear answer.