

WE LIVE 100 yards from the railroad tracks, and we hear the noise day and night: the blasting horns, the clattering boxcars, the MARTA trains whining like broken violins. To the kids it might as well be Disneyland. "Big frain," my 21-month-old son says when he hears the whistle. "Go see it!" We dash to the corner. "Hi, big frain," he says, as if greeting an old friend.

The boy loves trains as much as he loves playing catch. He thinks everything is a ball, even cellphones and glass jars. He lies awake at night, singing about baseball bats. His favorite garment is a secondhand Braves T-shirt with Jason Heyward's name on the back. In the car on the way to the grocery store, I turn on the radio. "Bay-ball game," he says, hearing the crowd noise.

I can imagine many years of father-son excursions, built around our favorite things. The boy and I walk a quarter mile to the nearest MARTA station, East Lake, joined by Johnny, his favorite uncle, and along the way we teach him about our favorite baseball team. We tell him about the Braves of our own childhood, the losing, the losing, the miracle of 1991, the hanging curve to Kirby Puckett, the '92 home plate slide by Sid Bream. We ride our favorite mode of transportation four stops west to the Georgia State station downtown. From there we walk a mile south to Turner Field. Uncle Johnny takes our picture by the Hank Aaron statue. We buy our tickets, high above home plate, for as little as \$14.50 each. We stop at the H&F stand for ice-cold Cokes and the best ballpark burgers in America. Then we sit down in our favorite stadium to watch baseball as the sun sets beyond our favorite skyline.

But this is wishful thinking. After the 2016 season, long before my son calculates his first batting average, the Braves will leave Atlanta for a new stadium in the northwestern suburbs. In truth, if not in name, they will become the Cobb County Braves. And for us, a weeknight game will become a logistical nightmare.

What will I say when he asks me why the team moved? I could tell him Turner Field was too old, but that would be a lie. It opened for baseball just 17 years ago. The Braves claim it needs \$150 million worth of improvements, but it still looks new, inside and out.

I could say the Braves did what the people of metro Atlanta wanted, but that would be pure speculation. Team officials made sure the public had no chance to sway their decision. They formed their plans in secret and announced them as if they'd been written in stone. "If it had leaked out," team president John Schuerholz said, "this deal would not have gotten done."

MY
TOWN
MY
TEAM



Thomas
Lake

BRAVES

I could tell him part of the Braves' argument against Turner Field is its supposed "lack of consistent mass-transit options," but that would be disingenuous. You can reach the current stadium by train and an easy walk, as we do, or by train and a short ride on a shuttle bus, as many others do. The new stadium will open in a county where the MARTA line has never gone. In essence the Braves are saying, "This river's too shallow. Let's move to the desert!"

Cobb County opted out of MARTA in the 1970s, and it has no imminent plan to opt back in. "Let me make this perfectly clear: There is going to be no MARTA system coming to Cobb County," county commission chairman Tim Lee told *The Marietta Daily Journal* in 2011. Two years later, when the Braves announced their move, Cobb County Republican Party chairman Joe Dendy said, "The solution is all about moving cars in and around Cobb and surrounding counties from our north and east, where most Braves fans travel from, and not moving people into Cobb by rail from Atlanta."

I tried moving my car into Cobb County on a recent Friday at rush hour. So did a lot of people. It took me 40 minutes to go seven miles, from Decatur to Midtown, and I still had nine miles to go. There is no way to know what will happen when game-night traffic and rush-hour traffic mingle on poor old I-75, but I suspect it will be no place for children. The Braves say the new stadium will offer a better fan experience. And it probably will, if you already live in the northern suburbs. The southeastern fans will be stuck in their cars, listening on the radio.

My son and I will ride downtown for Hawks games. We will ride downtown for Falcons games. We will probably ride downtown for Major League Soccer games when the new team starts playing, in 2017. And when he asks why we don't go to more Cobb County Braves games, I'll give him the best answer I can.

They don't like trains. □