

*My Coney Island
Baby*

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I

The Boardwalk

The air out here is mean with cold. It was bitter on the journey out from Manhattan too, but nothing like this. This is bleakness without respite. An hour in the subway was an hour shielded from the wind, and now it is almost noon and already threatening snow.

Michael and Caitlin walk quickly, side by side, heads lowered, shoulders hunched. Apart from a couple of drunks in a doorway arguing mutedly over a bottle, and further out past Nathan's along Surf Avenue an elderly black man leashed by a length of orange clothes line twine to a ridiculously small dog, the streets feel deserted, locked down. Most of the stores along here are shuttered too, some closed for the season, others having already written off the day as a bad debt. Passing trade is below freezing. The few places that insist on remaining open – a liquor store, a 7-Eleven, some sort of a goodwill shop with stacks of used, spine-cracked paperbacks in wicker baskets still out on the window ledges and green plastic sacks of clothes lining the pavement – do so more out of

stubbornness than duty. Apart from the 7-Eleven, which probably feels contractually obliged, these stores don't bother to burn much light. This afternoon, Coney Island feels like the end of the world, the last bastion just short of some great abyss, a place for the damned to drift, waiting their turn at nothingness.

They keep, as much as possible, to the shelter of the buildings. Words come in clenches, whistling and operatic, but it hurts just to breathe, and talking feels even worse. Caitlin holds her coat bunched closed across her throat in one fist. The wind is strong enough to pull tears from her eyes. It gusts and swirls around them, tugging at the hem of her overcoat, and she is glad that she thought to wear a scarf today, though she could have done with gloves, too. Her pockets are deep but provide barely the suggestion of heat.

Snow is forecast, torrents of the stuff, blizzards, but for now it is holding back, except for the occasional spatters that hit like thrown stones and leave imagined bruises in the air and on the skin. The sky above is mud, a bullying slob of grey running into grey, slaughtering detail and definition. Caitlin leans into Michael and they press on at a staggering half-run. Because there is nothing else to do, now that they have started in this direction.

This is the worst stretch of road, just here, where they hurry out across the empty street, because it takes them headlong into the mouth of the gale. They are forced to walk almost in one another's arms and the noise of the wind howling in their ears drowns out even the shambles of their own laboured breathing. And when, finally, they leave the promenade and turn out onto the pier the wind

lifts to new intent and tears at them, at their faces and their clothes, turning them dishevelled in a hurry. All they can do is make for the line of shacks, the boardwalk stalls locked down and abandoned for the season. Shelter to press against, and a hiding place.

‘Christ,’ Caitlin gasps, then laughs with a kind of terror. ‘It’s like something out of Revelation.’

Startled by how close she has come to the run of his own mind, Michael takes hold of her, with one arm drawing her to his body. Needing her that close. She looks up at him. Her face has turned the colour of flour. A new depth of pale. She is wearing a subtle daub of lip gloss, a sanguine red already hours worn, but her mouth is small, pinched tight against the cold, and the definition counts for very little, even when she smiles. He thinks of geisha women; sweet, delicate dolls in sky-blue kimonos, with their faces blanched by powder and a tiny rosebud pout painted into place. Made to look girlish and demure but in possession of a secret fire somewhere underneath or deep inside, the kind of raging, ravishing inferno that in a single blast can smelt bone down to dribbling soup. Caught in Caitlin’s wide, frightened animal eyes, transfixed by her drained expression, he glimpses, briefly and for the first time today, the merest hint as to who she truly is, or might be, or who she could be. She is a woman born to deceive, he suddenly realises. An angelic outer skin belying fiery lies within. And this is one of the details he loves most about her.

‘The end won’t be like this,’ he says, his mouth close enough to taste her breath, and for her to taste his. ‘When that comes we won’t even know it. We’ll be here, and

then a millionth of a second later, we won't be. Not even the dust of us.'

'Are you drunk?' she asks.

He shakes his head, and smiles. 'I'm too happy to be drunk.'

'Happy?'

'Of course. Hard to believe, I know, but that's how I feel. Because look where we are. Look who I'm with.'

She sets a hand on his chest, bats him playfully. He closes the gap between them and kisses her. They take turns leading the way, since there is no one around to see. She finds his tongue and rolls it gently with the tip of her own, forces its pulp against the rim of her upper front teeth. He goes willingly. Her mouth has the heat of tea. She breathes into him and he breathes back. It is the perfect give and take, like waves, a kind of essence of sex. After a time, they ease apart, she instigating the break with a subtle bringing together of her lips. But the split is merely temporary, and designed simply to let her settle more comfortably against him. He leans back against a boarded-over stall, a long narrow shed painted in faded laurel-green emulsion, heavy-duty stuff that, even so, has weathered badly, and she folds herself again into his embrace. When one hand slips downwards and cups the demure swell of her ass he feels her mouth bend into a grin, forcing his own to follow towards laughter, and when they close their eyes, they are children, playing at being in love. By making a nest just beneath the skin, certain memories put themselves beyond the reach of change.

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Below and on their left, the white strand stretches emptily northwards, acting like a framing edge to the main event, the bigger picture, the enormous sprawl of ocean that, in close, bucks and moils. Frothing, needlepoint flecks mottle a surface dull as lead, great furred bilges of surf break hard against the shoreline. Further out, a peculiar sense of calm prevails, at least to the eye, some fast shuffling deception of distance coupled with the perpetual twilight's condensed striations.

Pressed together, they listen, with delicious and undisclosed terror, to the crashing sounds of the water careening against the pier's stanchion posts and to the wild, mournful bleating of the wind.

'Barb's got cancer,' Michael says, speaking the words in a soft, almost absent fashion.

For an instant, she is sure that she must have misheard, yet there is a sense of the news in his demeanour. She searches his face, but he is staring out over her shoulder towards the horizon.

'What?'

'In the kidneys. It's been there for a while, but you know what she's like. She's the kind who has to piss black before a bell goes off.'

He winces and purses his lips, as if the words themselves hurt to speak.

'Jesus.'

The weakness of his expression strikes Caitlin all at once. His flesh has the bruised shade and texture of putty, and hangs from his strongest features, thickening his nose and lending a maudlin heft to his cheeks. His mouth seems to be receding too, sinking finally from the strain of

holding back years' worth of the things that so badly need saying. He has recently turned forty-eight years old. January sixth. Forty-eight is no age any more, not the way it once was, but lack of sleep, added to the many other extenuating factors, has caused rust to set in. Also, he is probably forty pounds overweight, and that, even on a thickset five-ten frame, is the sort of burden that takes a toll. There is a hint of lameness in his walk now, his joints answering to the first seasonal tweak of sciatica; his head hangs, and his big shoulders have lately taken on a certain constricting roundness. She knows what age can do, and how suddenly its effects can grab the light, but what makes it all so difficult to accept is that, in her mind, he remains so young, so vibrant, still the strong, loving man who first approached her in that bar all those years ago and who made her fall so hard. Decades ago, now. The arrangement they keep encourages delusion, of course, meeting as they do just once a month but every month, the first Tuesday without fail. With such a bulk of their lives spent in wait, reality has been allowed, even encouraged, to turn fragile.

When he can no longer comfortably evade her studied gaze he meets it and sighs, a heaving gust that sings of its weariness. And all at once, she recognises him. The way his eyes narrow and elongate, the paper-cut sharpness of his lips, the smile always apparently so little-meant once it breaks the surface but which feels precious as it wells. This is him. This is who he is: her big, lumbering Irishman. She leans in against his neck. The sigh is for her, she knows. Everything is for her. Shuddering loose from the grip of the world in order to free himself fully and completely, even if only for these few hours.

‘So far, they’ve taken vats of blood and done a battery of scans. She’s already had two biopsies, and now they want to take a look at her liver. She’s under a Mr Wylie, who’s supposed to be one of the top men in his field. He seems like a decent sort. At least, he looks you in the eye when he speaks to you, which is more than most of them will.’

Caitlin’s heart is beating very hard, the pulse undulating upwards from her chest and flooding her mind, and for a moment she is uncertain about what to do, whether to pull away from the embrace or to wrap herself even more tightly to Michael’s body. But the grip of his arm around the small of her back absolves her of choice, and so she presses her face into the pocket of his neck again, closing her eyes, as if this alone will be enough to shut out the world and keep her safe. Her throat has also tightened, and words feel impossible as anything other than whispers.

‘Jesus,’ she repeats. ‘That’s such awful news. I’m sorry.’

‘I know,’ he says. ‘I know you’re sorry. I’m sorry, too. But it’s not enough. Wylie is doing what he can, but the prognosis isn’t great. I think he fears the worst. Surgery was initially mentioned, but the tests revealed more than he’d have liked. He hasn’t said anything outright, but he keeps dropping words like “aggressive” and “metastasis” into his sentences, words that don’t exactly fill you with confidence. And it’s only going to get worse from here. Barb is scheduled for fifty-five cycles of chemotherapy, and that will be an entirely new kind of terrible. She’ll almost certainly lose her hair and we’ve been told to expect heavy bouts of nausea and fatigue. I’ve read about it. The chemo hits everything, good cells as well as bad. That’s how it works. It’s poison to the system, which to

me makes no sense whatsoever. For now she's coping, but that's mostly still the shock, I think.'

The words pour from him without inflection, and his stare has knitted itself to some far-off place or thing, the dreamy trance of a boxer who has been knocked half a dozen times too many in the head, or of a drunk who has abandoned all pretence of being otherwise. Then his hand climbs her spine and gently cups the back of her head, and his mouth, high above her ear, makes the sound of a kiss. The wind is everywhere, immense. Even the locked-down shack behind them groans and rocks. She tightens her embrace, fastening herself to him. His arms squeeze around her in response.

'I'm to blame. Wylie told us that the cancer has been active for upwards of a year. That's how he put it. And he looked at me when he spoke. As usual, Barb had done a decent job of hiding it, but after all the years we've been together, you'd think I'd be able to read her. I should have picked up on the signs. Because they were all there. Some nights I'd wake and find her gone from the bed, and she's lost so much weight these past few months that she can't even sit comfortably any more. Her bones have started to show.'

Back when he and Caitlin had first started going together, he'd been keeping down a second job, weekend shifts, in a garage owned by Barbara's cousin, Jerry. His main work, then as now, was in sales, the sort of number that passed in most minds for smart because it kept you in a chair most of the day and made a suit compulsory, part of the uniform. But the weekend work answered a different need.

This was dogsbody stuff, the slog of lumps and grinds, him being next to useless when it came to anything engine-related but able enough across the shoulders and willing both in body and in mind to sweat. He was paid, of course, folding cash too, twenty-five or fifty a day, or however much passed for fair to middling back then. But he'd not really gotten into it for the money.

Even beyond the duties of familial loyalty, Jerry was a decent type, and badly in need of help. The man wasn't slacking; he worked long hours and put in genuine shifts but he was the kind who needed someone in it with him, a commiserating hand when panic hit and everything turned cluttered. For him, the books were just too much, and business simply wasn't his thing. The solution to that would turn out, eventually, to be Wanda, a woman with thirty square in the sights of both barrels but who had never quite shaken off the girlish part of herself. She was tall and thin, wiry, with the kind of svelte, rippled body that any dancer, Broadway or exotic, would have gone into serious hock in order to possess. She chewed gum, kept her rust-coloured hair in a thick permanent and wore short shorts or mini-skirts, alternating back and forth between vinyl black and the lustiest scarlet, every day of the year apart from Christmas. She talked baseball like she had shares in the game and knew some diamond cuss-words. And, because there are all kinds of excuses for love, she was a veritable sweetheart about anything to do with Jerry. Beyond capable in every direction worth taking, she stepped in, seized control of the receipts, logged the inventory, fixed bookings, handled orders and bills, and was single-handedly responsible for organising him into someone even halfway

successful, as a man as well as a mechanic. She also slept with him, cooked and cleaned for him, washed his clothes and, eventually, married him. But at the point where Jerry first began to slip into meltdown mode, she was still a good year off in the future, and so the onus of keeping cousin-in-law upright and afloat fell from a height on Michael.

The situation was quickly deteriorating. Jerry had taken over the garage, against all perceived wisdom and on the back of a pretty nihilistic mortgage, some eighteen months previously, and for a while he'd gotten by on credit and sheer enthusiasm. Starting up in trade is beastly without backing cash, so credit was the only option: credit on materials, credit on wages, credit on the jars of instant coffee and the pre-packaged Twinkies that he slurped and ate standing hunched beneath some gaping hood in an effort to save time and money on lunch breaks. Credit which, in the long run, only made everything immeasurably worse. And once the magnitude of the accrued debt exposed itself, he got to drinking all ends up, the sort of brown-paper-bag stuff that requires both hands free just to keep pace, and in whiskey or whatever he had a fuming temper that would snap like rotten twigs at the least provocation. After those around him had bailed in search of better cover, what he needed, especially at weekends, was someone who knew him and could tolerate his ways, preferably someone who could also crank a jack, change a tyre and hoist a winch without needing to be screamed at and watched over, and who could refrain from going all Joe Hill on him about lunch breaks, toilet breaks, smoking breaks, time-and-a-half after six, double hours Sunday.

Michael provided a willing solution.

Six months on from the burial of what would prove to be their only child – their little boy, James Matthew – the world of things had changed. A few seconds of joy and then fourteen weeks, two days and five hours of waiting for the kind of inevitable end that still, even months later, even years, packed all the devastation of a train wreck. Everyone copes differently with that sort of ordeal. Some turn to prayer, others to therapy. Michael's way was to peel back from Barb's clinging and tuck himself into some muscle work. He felt bad about doing it, but then he felt bad about so many things that after a few weeks it became just another entry on his list of shame. What he needed was to work bodily and hard, and at the garage there were no boundaries. He could sweat himself almost to the point of blackout, could go at it until his arms ached and his back felt set to snap, and then he could keep on, wallowing in that pain, wanting to hurt in all the ways that he could actually understand. It was physical and masculine, and in its way redemptive. And later, after they'd crawled out into the darkness and bolted up the doors on another good Sunday, he and Jerry would hit a bar, some joint that had a game going on a small screen or, depending on their mood, somewhere with low lights and piped jazz, the kind of blue notes that you can only really get in back-alley places and unlicensed cellar bars, those holes in the night that call to mind the speakeasy atmosphere of a time when booze played by different rules. A pealing trumpet, an alto sax that squeals its way into that pocket beyond tears, in where grief has four solid walls, a ceiling and a floor, and where the sound can build and swell and bounce.

It was in one of these places that he first caught sight of Caitlin. She was a kid then, twenty-two, but possessed of a freshness that had long since faded from his life. Already married but somehow still girlish, still apparently light with curiosity as to the limits of the world, and soft all the way through. The yellow and puce flower patterns of her summer dress must have been entirely unsuited to the autumnal blow, but for a barroom its cut was perfect, the cheap cotton cut clinging to her hips, waist and breasts in a way that emphasised delicacy, and cupping her ass like grabbing hands when she picked up her drinks from the counter and walked back across the floor to the booth in which her friend Sally sat idling with a green plastic throwaway lighter. She'd ordered a Sea Breeze and a Mojito, clearly not their first of the evening judging by the way she smiled when she caught him watching her from his place at the bar. Head a little down but eyes big and all the way up, acting coy only as a tease. An hour or so later, when she approached the bar again, he was by then far enough along on beer and shots to slip down off his barstool, move casually alongside her and ask if she would allow him to buy her a drink. Even now, he can recall the wide-open silver of her eyes, a shade like ocean water on a white day. Her skin seemed to gleam even in the bar's dim light, and her mouth held back as much as it could, keeping close-lipped against a smile until something caused her to give up. No memory survives of how she replied to his advance, or even what magic words of his made her decide that he was worth a shot, but the image of her face as it was that evening, that Sunday night, remains burned

in sharp edges in his mind. When she spoke, she did so in a voice low enough to steam, and as Coltrane or Parker or Ornette Coleman or whoever it was dragged soul and then spirit squealing across the barroom ceiling, he could do nothing but lean in to catch what she was offering, to hear her words and breathe of her.

And on towards midnight, after enough of the corners had been taken off and enough waiting had been done, they settled for a dance, there on the barroom floor. They stood in one another's arms, dancing but barely moving, or moving like cobweb on a breath of night breeze, as tunes seeped one into the next. The skin of her temple pressed hot and damp against his cheek, and he bowed his head and told her things in murmurs that he had never shared with anyone else. Together, they felt complete. It wasn't about sparks. This was fusion, nothing less. And soon after, when it came time for them to part, he scribbled down his office telephone number and asked her to please call him, tomorrow, tomorrow morning if she could. She said nothing, just read the number with concentration, then folded the scrap of paper in two and then in two again and slipped it into the change pocket of her purse. They kissed once, a brief and almost cursory coming together of their mouths, and then she nodded goodbye, slipped from his grasp and hurried to join her friend across the barroom floor. He stood where she had left him and watched her climb the open side-wall staircase to the street above without once looking back, certain that he'd neither see nor hear from her again. In that moment, something shifted inside of him, a churning terror at the prospect of being forced to live his life apart

from her. Ridiculous, considering they'd only just met,
but nonetheless truthful.