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Coney Island Caviar

Hannah Rose Lomele
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Recommended Citation

Lomele, Hannah Rose, "Coney Island Caviar" (2018). *Senior Projects Spring 2018*. 355.
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Bard

CONEY ISLAND CAVIAR

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

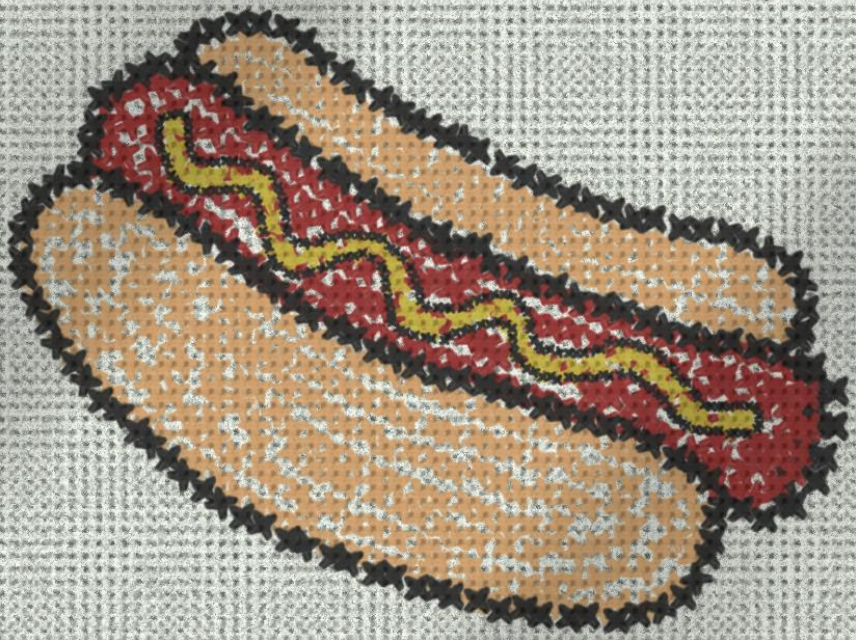
by

Hannah Rose Lomele

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2018

CONEY ISLAND CAVIAR



HANNAH ROBELOMELE

This, and everything else, is for my family, near and far.

Thank you.

“To Inquiring Friends: I have troubles today that I did not have yesterday. I had troubles yesterday that I have not today. Admission to the burning ruins – 10 cents.”

George C. Tilyou, on a sign erected the morning

after a fire destroyed Steeplechase Park, 1907

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THE SIDESHOW TALKER'S PREAMBLE

Step right up – with your own eyes –

Everything that you see – pictured, painted, photographed, or portrayed in one way or another – you will see, live, right inside – and more, much more – you'll meet them all – on the inside –

They're here – they're real – they're alive!

Here's where you'll meet Miss High Voltage, Miss High Voltage, the electric-proof girl – electric-proof girl cannot be electrocuted! See her on the inside – watch with your own eyes! Ten thousand volts of electricity – pumping, pumping through her lovely body, see sparks fly from her fingertips! From the tip of her tongue – Miss High Voltage, shockingly – one of the most electrifying attractions now appearing anywhere – and right here is where you see her –

Hurry, hurry, hurry – the world's greatest – the world famous – The Human Torso, a mystifying medical malady – no arms or legs but he can shave his face with unbelievable grace – no arms or legs but he can roll a cigarette before you've flicked your lighter – you have to see it to believe it – see it and believe it! All here – all inside – and with tickets at just – they're going fast –

The Queen of Kerosene, red-hot, drinking gasoline – like you or I would eat an ice cream – ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, children of all ages – watch as this burning beauty becomes a human volcano – but don't get too close – all incredible, live acts – the strange, the wonders, the weird – they're going fast – the bizarre, the macabre, freaks! Human curiosities – the most unusual of attractions – here, at the auditorium of oddities –

Ah - you've noticed her – yes – The Laundress – yes! Perhaps not well-dressed – a sweeter countenance you've never encountered, but I digress – hands of constant wrinkles – and yet she's never lost her youth – some say she could sew an emperor his clothes – ha! She may seem small, but hangs the longest laundry lines in the world – find out for yourself – inside is where you'll meet her –

Twice a day – do mind the broken glass – twice a day – two opportunities to come and see – to come and be – The Demolition Party – women draped in pearls and little else – men you'll recognize from your history books! They hardly wait for the fire to die down – grab a hammer and join in on the fun – do mind the ash – nothing like a cough to ruin the party – what you find is yours to keep – what you find is yours to destroy –

The attractions, unlike anywhere else – unlike anyone else – they don't end there! An act never before seen – someone you could only meet in your dreams – the elusive, the enigmatic, The Author – hurry, hurry, hurry! Her face, illuminated by blue light – her fingers, dancing across the keys – you can almost see her brain whirring – can almost hear her mind working – if you're lucky – or not! She might write about you, too –

And you – yes, you – on the inside – maybe self-made – maybe born different – you, yes, a freak! Don't be shy, now – step right up – they're all right here – they're you – yes, you! – live, on the inside – I've seen it all – seen you all – now you can see it all, too – with your own eyes – you need only buy – to see – for the small price of a ticket – yes, *you*, in the act – you might even surprise yourself – yes, that's right – on the inside –

You're here – you're real – you're *alive* –

THE EIGHTH WONDER

1896

You wait for the rest of the passengers to go on deck before extracting a small red horn, your mother's *cornicello*, from the inside of your left boot. You kiss it, make a prayer over it, and then retie it in your boot for safekeeping.

The passengers cluster against the ship's railing. Wary of the men, who laugh too loudly at jokes they assume you don't understand, you walk to the other side of the ship, looking back at the direction from which you've come.

Leaning over the balustrade, your toes pointing and your heels hovering just over the deck, you watch the waves break into crackling foam and enjoy your first moment of solitude in weeks.

The only notice you take of passing time is when the afternoon heat tilts away from your face and a trail of goose bumps crawls up your neck.

A commotion rises from the bow. You step back and look over your shoulder to see heads tilted in a constellation of shared awe. Liberty is gazing upon the ship, unblinking and brazen in her clouded copper robes; her visage, though weathered into a rounded landscape, slashes through the sky with the easy intimidation of an unloved child.

You turn away to see that a stretch of land has risen up over the horizon, as though in the span of a breath, directly opposite the congregation of the reverential passengers. A vague outline of sundry edifices blurs above the coastline into a panorama of scattered shadows.

When you first catch sight of it, you think it is just another building, though twice as tall as the rest, silhouetted against the golden light of approaching dusk in the spectrum of gray that stretches along the seashore. You fold yourself over the railing and squint. *Un elefante,* you think, before you can even consider if that's true.

Yes, you decide a moment later. *An elephant.*

Towering above the rest of the island, the elephant's trunk is flanked with ivory tusks and protrudes in an arc, landing unseen somewhere before it; a glowing howdah perched upon its back is capped with a gilded crescent. Its penetrating black eyes, perfectly round, stare through a ring of stark white. You glance about yourself, but you are alone at the stern, the others still watching Lady Liberty as she drifts farther and farther away.

You unfold yourself, peeling your stomach from the rail, and briefly worry that weeks of sharing a cramped cabin below the pitching sea may have affected your mind.

Turning from the colossal elephant, you head below deck to collect your belongings. The temptation to turn back for one more glimpse pricks at the back of your neck, but your mother's retellings of Lot's wife render your head stiff and rigid upon your shoulders. *It's better*, you think*, to never know for certain if it was real.*

In your uncle’s laundry, you feel small in a dear way, like a precious turquoise egg in a nest of bundled linens and knotted threads. You are comfortable nestled between the enormous rolling laundry baskets and wooden clothespins, which reach and point like the elongated index finger of an accusing preacher.

Each day you thread needles with proficiency and fix holes and tears in linen trousers, cotton dresses, and silk stockings. You relentlessly scrub the weekly wet wash in buckets full of scalding water with laundry blue till your hands no longer feel the blistering discomfort. You stand on stepladders and hang crisp, white hotel sheets on bakery string then watch them fall against each other in the wind, imagining a cat's tongue lapping the top of a bowl of cream.

Your days pass slowly but pleasantly in the laundry. You enjoy the productivity, however tedious; the ceaseless cycle of dirty coming in and clean going out is soothing and dulcet in its predictability and sweet, clean smell, though you dislike the appearance of your wrinkled fingers and the unceasing dampness that pervades your hair, your clothing, and even your bedspread.

The other girls are from Italy, too, cousins, daughters, and sisters of your uncle's friends. They have been in Brooklyn longer than you have and spend their days giggling into their tanned hands and practicing their English, dropping their work with expert carelessness whenever out of your uncle's sight. Before leaving in the evenings, they look into the store windows and fix their hats in a sequence of minute adjustments while you watch, a still and silent silhouette in the reflection beside them.

Suffering from the obstinacy of mutual distaste, you and the other girls, Margherita and Allegra, leer at each other from far corners of the laundry. You find the others *sciocco* and

girlish, more likely to pinch their cheeks to appear as though they can afford rouge rather than save enough money to purchase their own. The latter dislike you for the same reason; your tireless effort and thoughtful, precise stitching quickly overshadows their own, less effective labor a few weeks following your arrival. Unwilling to acknowledge their own shortcomings, at least in your eyes, the girls choose to blame your relative success in the laundry on your blood ties to the owner.

Your uncle is oblivious to the poor rapport between who he calls "*le sue ragazze*," owing to the fact that the only signs of "his girls'" distaste for each other is deeply embedded in the casual and therefore imperceptible passive aggression of vexed women who are equal parts clever and petty.

In actuality, it is practice that has made you so talented a seamstress. First, at home, when your mother's fingers grew too stiff and sore to do the work, and now at the laundry, and, occasionally, in the privacy of your room at the boarder's, when ladies you meet at church who knew your mother back home remember you as the scrawny, tanned child grasping at her skirts.

The others don't know about the private commissions and so you hide the evidence – a threadbare wedding veil, trousers that need to be taken out at the hips, cuffs yellowed with age, wear, and sweat – in the lining of your winter coat, an oversized hand-me-down from an older brother, through a hole in a pocket that has long since given out. The guilt of lying weighs on you, especially on Sunday mornings, but the thickened envelopes you send to your mother every month release you from the remorse, at least for a few days.

Beyond the laundry and the church, you do not venture far into Brooklyn. Stories of debauchery, gangs, and general vulgarity of the sort your mother would cross herself for reach your ears through the constant twittering of Margherita and Allegra, and this gossip appeases any suppressed need for scandal you possess.

It is only because your uncle overhears Margherita and Allegra's plans to spend their Sunday off at Coney Island and assumes your involvement that you are forced to accompany the girls on the hot, crowded elevated railroad to the beach.

The girls abandon you almost immediately, swept away on the boardwalk by men who call them Maggie and Ally in unaccented bursts of laughter.

For a moment, you worry about being alone, but the throngs of people, shouldering each other with thoughtless intimacy, hide your otherwise improper solitude. And, though you're reluctant to admit it, your subsequent anonymity is exhilarating. Unsure of what to do, you lean against the barrier that separates the boardwalk from the sand and look out at the Atlantic.

Women in black wool bathing costumes kick up cool water at the ocean's edge. Striped umbrellas, each inscribed with the signet of George C. Tilyou, obscure others from the heat. Men lying on their sides prop up their elbows and grin, grasping a pair of sunglasses in one hand though they squint, their heads slanted in the face of the blaring sun.

One woman in jodhpurs and a white sunhat rides a bicycle across the sand, dodging the innumerable pairs of bare feet that kick out from under umbrellas and off the edges of towels.

You are abruptly thrown into the metal barrier as a group of men in straw hats and half-buttoned shirts pass behind you. "Sorry, miss!" one yells, looking over his shoulder with a sliding sideways grin. You hold your hands to your chest and watch as he flicks his hand at you in a wave. A swirling pattern of faded black lines protrudes from underneath his cuffed sleeve, taking the shape of a bird, or maybe a ship. You take a deep, shuddering breath and descend to the beach, in search of the safe, lazy lethargy of the sunbathers.

Immediately ushered into a wooden bathhouse, you hesitantly trade a quarter with a clerk for a yellow knitted bathing costume, worn black stockings, and a bowl of steaming clam chowder. You try to hand the bathing costume back - you only wanted to go on the beach, not

swim - but the clerk doesn't understand you, due to the unintelligible recipe of your heavy accent mixed with your shy disinclination to speak English any louder than a whisper.

"No, thank you," you manage slowly, pushing the still-damp bathing costume into his hands.

"It's included, lady," the clerk says. "It's yours for the day. You can change in thirteen-oh-four." He points to a tall door made of vertical wood slats tinted a faint blue and then watches you expectantly till you doubtfully, halfheartedly, go inside.

Inside the cramped, boxy changing room, you sit on the floor, draw your knees up to your chin, and emit a silent prayer asking your mother for forgiveness. Then, you slide the stockings over your hips and step into the bathing costume, running a hand over your soft curves, more visible than ever before in the wet, sticking wool. You ensure that the skirt of the bathing suit is lying flat behind you and bundle your clothing into a messy roll, your boots' shoestrings tied and dangling over your arm. You imagine that, in the yellow bathing costume, you look like a warped bottle of viscous olive oil.

The beach is heaving with people, inhaling and exhaling with the gentle wax and wane of the waves and its visitors. You try to weave yourself through the groups of girls, men, and children, avoiding stepping on others' towels, discarded dresses, and crumpled trousers, clutching your clothing tight to your stomach as you approach the waterline. There are fewer people in the water than out, and you watch them hop the small waves amid sporadic giggles and screeches as the ocean’s chill bites their toes. You notice, in surprise, a familiar face; Margherita, and then, never too far away, Allegra, posing in matching, striped bathing costumes and throwing their heads back in amusement.

At the far end of the beach, you see a small group flocking at the water's edge, watching a swimmer row into the ocean in a small wooden boat. The swimmer yells inaudibly at her spectators, throws her slim arms above her head in an arch, palms overlapping, and dives.

"That's the greatest lady diver of eighteen-ninety-six." You turn quickly to see that the man in the straw hat with the forearm tattoo is standing behind you, his hands in his pockets, watching the diver float leisurely on her back. She elegantly arranges her arms in a halo around her head while her audience applauds and cheers. "Well, she'd say of all time," he adds.

You nod politely and try to move away, starting to feel itchy in your bathing suit.

"Come on," he says. He doesn't touch you, but you feel compelled to stop. "You've gotta see her up close."

The tension suddenly suffocates you, as thick as butter and as slow to melt. You wrestle with your reservations for an imperceptible instant while visions of Margherita and Allegra's smiles dissolve into a hundred-tooth grin that bares itself at you, darkly persuasive in its almost frightening and overpowering delight. Fears of going with this man turn into fears of him leaving without you and so you nod before you can change your mind.

"Call me Billy," he says. "Come on."

Miss Ward, the greatest lady diver of 1896, overflows with the buoyancy of self-confidence and careless ease.

She is tall and agile and unafraid to demonstrate either, impishly plucking off men's hats to adorn her own head and cartwheeling across the sand, water dripping off her sodden hair and leaving circles of sand darkened like brown sugar in her wake.

"Welcome to Coney Island," she says when you meet her, "where the only thing *not* to do is get burned."

Miss Ward and her friends speak too quickly, touch too easily, and tease too honestly. They ensnare you in their private dramas with trusting immediacy, asking your opinion on matters unknown to you and laughing, happily, when you shrug helplessly in response, as though you are making a joke rather than expressing genuine uncertainty. Eventually, you begin to laugh, too, affected, despite your best efforts, by their determined good humor, in the way that a lively hymn will prompt your foot to tap of its own accord.

When they tire of the beach, they wait for each other to return the rented swimming costumes and amble, in a pleasant clump, toward Surf Avenue. At the others' urging, you eat your clam chowder, chewing each sinewy gray mass with discernable distaste, which only serves to further amuse Miss Ward and her admirers. And yet, the clam chowder is still hot and creamy, leaving a warm contentment to simmer in your chest, bubbling and boiling up to your throat like a pot of water for pasta.

You see yourself through their eyes, for you've never been one to deal in illusions. To them, you're The Immigrant, a character from a novel, someone intrinsically different for reasons other than birthplace. Maybe your accent is to blame – in Italian, you speak with

eloquence in phrases learned from your religious upbringing, but in English, you stammer like a young child reading aloud for a cruel teacher.

A stab of understanding for Margherita and Allegra pinches in your chest. No wonder they are uninterested in you, the reminder of what they left behind, the reminder of someone who doesn't belong in the same way they do, no matter how they try to hide it. They wear silly hats and practice their English, but not out of vanity; rather, it is out of the desire to be seen as real.

It's strange, to be treated as though you are not real, but a performer hired to provide a new form of amusement to people who had grown tired of the other amusements Coney Island had to offer.

And yet, you feel no resentment. Miss Ward, a Gibson girl with wet hair, is like a character from a novel to you, too.

Another quarter and another prayer are spent at Sea Lion Park, a sizeable span of acreage enclosed by a fence. Several unusual looping structures and a great lagoon populate the park. The enormous, gray, and potbellied creatures clap and dance along the edges of the lagoon, and performers in inflatable rubber boots walk across the water to the sound of raucous applause and cheers.

One particular ride in the odd shape of a triangle cut down the middle is preceded by a long line of couples in various states of impatient pleasure. You watch as a flat-bottomed boat on one side of the ride creaks to the top, where the passengers jump out and clamor into an identical boat on a parallel track that faces down. Suddenly, the boat spills over the edge in its descent, the passengers shrieking in mingled delight and fear. You gasp in shock as the boat

splashes into the lagoon then skims across the surface of the pool. You are relieved when the passengers reemerge in fits of laughter, not having capsized as you were dreading, just soaked to the bone.

"Oh, let's go on Shoot-the-Chutes!" Miss Ward cries, following your gaze.

The line goes by quickly. The skin on your chest feels too thin, your heart pounding against it like a battering ram. When the others are distracted, involved in the banter of their endless esoteric jokes, you lean down as though to tie the lace on your boot. You don't have to look; the shape of your mother's *cornicello*, given to you the morning of your voyage to Ellis Island, is engraved into your fingertips.

But it isn't there. Your hand grasps only the end of a piece of string and the ghost of a little red horn that your mother kissed and held against your cheek as you cried.

You complete the ascent to the top of the slide in a haze of anxiety, though it no longer concerns riding Shoot-the-Chutes. Billy, unaware that anything is amiss, insists on boarding the boat before you so that you don't receive the brunt of the splash upon colliding with the lagoon.

The skin at your chest, you feel certain, has ruptured completely now, though hidden beneath layers of chemise, corset, and bodice, to allow your heart, in its panicked frenzy, to jump out of you entirely, maybe to fall into the lagoon, where it might not be so tortured.

No coherent thoughts remain, in Italian or in English.

And then, suddenly, you are flying.

Enfolded between Billy and Miss Ward on the boat, you have a modicum of privacy. As the others shriek and laugh, you press your face into Billy's back and grip his shoulders in a muddle of fear and sorrow, the two sensations having become indistinct.

"*Mi dispiace, Mamma*," you whisper.

Billy turns his head to look over his shoulder at you with a sliding sideways grin. At this distance, you notice he has freckles, probably exacerbated by the sun, and the shock of that intimacy diverts you from your grief. He releases a hand from its tight, white-knuckled grip along the boat's side and reaches for yours. He grasps your hand, hard, and you inhale a stifling mouthful of rushing air.

If he had done so before, on the beach, or on the boardwalk, you would have torn your hand out of his. His large, rough hand engulfing yours would have felt like an incarceration. But here, on Shoot-the-Chutes, your mother's *cornicello* no longer safe in your boot, you squeeze his hand back.

He looks back out with a shout of elation that makes you smile despite yourself. You peer over his shoulder at the quickly approaching lagoon below and wonder how close you are to the sky. But when you raise your eyes, something immense and gray is interrupting the clouds, a figure you had written off as a strange daydream, brought upon by seasickness and cabin fever.

Era reale, you think. *It was real.*

And then, without warning, a splitting gush of water crashes over you as the boat strikes the lagoon, and you choke at the force of your Coney Island baptism.

As the moon rises over the boardwalk, the horde that occupied the beach pack their things and shuffle onto the elevated railroad.

Under the glow of night, the elephant's hide seems silver. You and the others crawl underneath a rollercoaster that encircles the elephant like a tether. A bird's nest has formed in a concave crook of one of the elephant's ears.

"So, you see the elephant?" Miss Ward had asked, sly mocking in her voice, when you all disembarked Shoot-the-Chutes.

"Yes," you had responded. "You too, no?" The others erupted into laughter as Miss Ward raised her eyebrows. You looked to Billy, confused. "You see the elephant, yes?"

Billy smiled crookedly, hesitant. "Well, not in that way," he had said, and one of the other men clapped his shoulder.

"That's not what I heard," the other man had said, and the tips of Billy's ears reddened. He refused to explain what they meant.

Billy offers his hands, intertwined to improvise a flat surface. You lift your skirts and daintily rest your foot in his palms then scurry through the broken window of the cigar shop that once inhabited one of the elephant's front legs.

Wooden cigar boxes litter the counter. Miss Ward flips through them. "Already looted," she says. One of her admirers pulls out a cigarette case.

Billy hands you one. You think of your mother, who hated the smell of tobacco, especially as a laundress often tasked with removing the burning odor from clothes. Anytime one of your older brothers came home with musty, stale smoke wafting from their jackets, she

would make them bathe, fully clothed, in the nearby stream, no matter the time of night or the weather, rubbing them raw with lye and tallow.

Miss Ward uses a Magic Pocket Lamp to light her cigarette. “To the old Elephantine Colossus,” she says, the cigarette already nestled between her red, pouting lips. She takes a deep, nearly yawning, breath, and then slowly, ever slowly, Miss Ward closes her eyes and parts her mouth. A filigree of smoke clouds before her and, through the haze, she bequests a dawdling, sensuous grin. You peer through the veil of smoke at her and a rippling of disquiet passes through you.

You hold the cigarette in between your middle and index fingers while someone else lights its end. You plan to put it to your lips for a few seconds then surreptitiously toss it out of the broken window.

Before you can lift it to your mouth, Billy has taken you by the elbow, a whisper dropped in your ear. He leads you upstairs, the lit cigarette dangling from your hand. Through the Thigh you enter the Stomach, an abandoned ballroom devoid of organs; then through the elephant’s Diaphragm and along the Liver to the left Lung, which was once a museum, though the significance of the artifacts left behind you do not know; from the Lung you climb a set of stairs leading to the Shoulder, and finally to the Cheek, a long gallery through which visitors can peer out the elephant’s eyes.

You lean your chest against the circular window of the elephant’s right eye, palms flush against the glass. A line of golden light on the water flickers in the moving waves like a candle’s flame.

Billy's hand, large and rough, rests on your hip. You freeze. You can see a faint reflection of his face in the window, his lips curved in a smirk. The hand slides up your torso and you jolt away, turning so that your back is against the elephant's eye. Billy's eyes brighten as he closes the distance between you, entrapping you in the alcove of the elephant's right eye.

"No, thank you," you say, staggering. Billy laughs, once, a humorless and abrupt outburst of smug pleasure.

You shut your eyes, tightening them against the sting of imminent tears, and force your hands forward, shoving them into Billy's chest.

He yelps in pain and you open your eyes, astounded by your own strength. Billy is clutching his chest. You blink, sweat or tears or something else entirely dripping from your cheek. He peels his hands from his chest and you see a small ring of scorched cloth and, underneath, a circle of red, raw skin. You look down at your hands, where the cigarette he gave you is still smoldering between your fingers.

Billy's gaze shifts from his burn to you, his fury snapping you out of your shocked reverie. You drop the cigarette onto the observatory's old, matted carpet and run, lifting your skirts above your knees, out of the Cheek, back through the Shoulder to the left Lung, down the Liver into the Diaphragm and the Stomach, tripping down the stairs of the Thigh, and dashing out through the old cigar shop in the Leg, ignoring the calls of Miss Ward and her sycophants.

You don't stop running till you reach the train station where, hours ago, you arrived at Coney Island with Margherita and Allegra. Panting, bent over the tracks, you hear the swelling, piercing tones of a siren. Just as the last train arrives, you look over at the great elephant, the

smell of smoke choking your lungs, and watch as enormous flames consume its condemning gaze.

AN INVENTORY OF RIDES AND ATTRACTIONS

B&B Carousell, Luna Park, 1906. A whimsical misspelling popular in a time when two dozen carousels existed simultaneously on the same stretch of Coney Island beach. Fifty hand carved horses; thirty-six jumpers (that go up and down) and fourteen standers (stationary mounts). Bought by the city a century later for one-point-eight million dollars and refurbished by Todd W. Goings of Carousels and Carvings, who repaired them with dowels and glue and eighty different colors of paint. Discovered one of the horses is the work of master carver Marcus Charles Illions, one of the four carousel horses created in 1909 to celebrate the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. All are still ridden by the sandy, sticky public, to Mr. Goings' chagrin.

Flip-Flap Railway, Sea Lion Park, 1895. The first looping rollercoaster in North America. A perfect wooden circle traversed by a car with only two seats, which was not especially economical. Tested with sand bags and monkeys. Created G-forces so extreme that riders got whiplash or blacked out altogether. The latter would eventually come to with the use of smelling salts.

Parachute Jump, Steeplechase Park, 1941. Has been called the "Eiffel Tower of Brooklyn." Functional parachutes rose and fell two hundred and fifty feet again, and again, and again. Each parachute required three cable operators. Riders were belted into a double seat hung from candy-colored parachutes (sponsored by the Life Savers and Candy Company), pulled to the summit of the tower by cables, and then floated gently to the ground. Passengers were often

stranded in midair or tangled in cables; a Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Rathborne were once suspended for five hours and yet returned the next day to ride again. Arno Rudolphi and Ann Hayward were married on the ride in the first and last "parachute wedding," in which the entire bridal party was suspended until the completion of the vows. No one ever died on the ride, despite rumors. Almost torn down in the 1960s by Fred Trump, who was too cheap to pay for its demolition. The only remaining relic of Steeplechase Park.

The Lilliputian Village, Dreamland, 1904. A miniature village modeled after fifteenth century Nuremburg. The permanent residence of three hundred dwarves, complete with a tavern, a restaurant, a theater, a circus, a jail, a railway, and a fire brigade, complete with a steam-powered fire engine and two ponies to pull it. All built to scale. The fire brigade would respond to a false alarm every hour. When the park was open, visitors would hit their heads on doorframes and squeeze into stairways. When the park closed each night, the citizens of Lilliputia resumed their normal lives as though they were not a popular attraction nestled within an amusement park.

The Tickler, Luna Park, 1906. The first ride that determined to "jostle, jolt, and jounce" its riders within the car as well as without. A slope resembling a pinball machine. A serpentine track, a maze of posts and rails. Saucer-shaped cars, cushioned with rubber, bumping rails and whirling down the incline, riders clinging to each other to prevent falling out. Its inventor, William F. Mangels, recalled, "At the end of the journey, the five passengers were usually scrambled together so hopelessly that attendants had to help them disembark."

Chanticleer Chicken Merry-Go-Round, Steeplechase Park, 1911. A carousel that replaced the typical carousel horses with gargantuan, colorful chickens. Specifically, thirty-eight chickens and fourteen ostriches. Three riders to one chicken.

Creation and Hell Gate, Dreamland, 1905. Creation, an illusion-based retelling of Genesis, culminating in Adam, Eve, and original sin in the Garden of Eden. Ran once an hour, every day of the week. A thirty-foot tall, topless statue of an angel advertised the ride at its entrance. The police insisted that Dreamland clothe the angel, but religious groups had the orders reversed on the basis that partial nudity was acceptable in providing Biblical education to the masses. In Hell Gate, a whirlpool appeared to swallow a boat below its surface. Passengers passed under a fire-breathing dragon for admission. It was an explosion of light bulbs in the underground caverns of Hell Gate in 1911 that burned Dreamland to the ground, for good.

A Trip to the Moon, Luna Park, 1901. Passengers sat on deck chairs in a wooden airship named *Luna*, her red, fully automated wings flapping. Wind, smoke, and searchlights created the illusion of landing on the moon, where the riders could walk off the gangplank and meet Selenites, the moon's inhabitants, and their king, the Man in the Moon, on a whimsically constructed moonscape set. The riders would then exit through a gift shop.

Steeplechase Horse Race, Steeplechase Park, 1907. Several steel tracks, parallel to each other, each with their own black, fiberglass, racing horse. A couple on each horse, the heaviest in the back; these horses were gravity-driven, and a heftier partner made for a faster ride (an

advantage in the race). However, the horse on the inside rail usually won regardless. The horses were fitted with saddles and stirrups, and the ride's conductors were dressed as jockeys. Quite popular in Victorian New York, when a couple couldn't be close but for the few minutes they were riding Steeplechase.

Fighting the Flames, Dreamland, 1904. Employed a cast of two thousand, including one hundred and twenty firefighters, four engines and hose wagons, and an extension ladder fire truck. Observant park visitors would cry "Fire!" as flames licked the lower floors of a six-story hotel. The alarm would be rung, and Fire Chief Sweeney would arrive, giving orders and pumping streams of water into the building's open windows. Breathtaking rescues of actors jumping into nets from dangerous heights. Actors trapped inside would flee to the top of the hotel, soon to be saved by firemen with scaling ladders the second before the roof caved in. Thousands of spectators would clap in awe then amble off to the next attraction while the set was reconstructed for the next performance.

Blowhole Theater, Steeplechase Park, 1912. An unavoidable stage located at the exit of the Steeplechase Horse Race. Hidden jets of compressed air would shoot up from vents and blow ladies' skirts above their heads. A dwarf dressed as a clown would scurry about with an electric cattle prod, shocking the ladies' male counterparts. Bleachers were provided on either side of the stage for those who desired to watch, for the small price of a ticket.

Shaw Channel Chute, West Brighton, 1886. Coaster that made a triple lap around the Elephant Hotel. Each four-passenger car was transported to the top of the coaster by elevator and had a dedicated brakeman. Was reportedly not very exciting and burned to the ground with the Elephant Hotel.

20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, Luna Park, 1903. Inspired by the Jules Verne novel. Unofficially known as A Trip to the North Pole. Over a hundred riders would board a submarine replete with portholes as the vessel submerged into a twenty-four-foot-deep pool. Miles of painted canvas wound onto spools on the other side of the portholes created the illusion of a submarine travelling underwater, passing fish, sharks, and the shipwreck of the *Flying Dutchman*. The temperature dropped, and the engines groaned and vibrated, and without having moved an inch, the passengers arrived at the North Pole to be greeted by Eskimos, their dogs, and icebergs (produced by refrigeration equipment). Riders were encouraged to take chips of ice from the North Pole as ephemeral summer souvenirs and even witnessed the aurora borealis before their return.

Leap Frog Railroad, Dreamland, 1905. Built on a pier extending out onto the sea to meet a challenge once posed by Mark Twain: "the only thing Yankee ingenuity had not accomplished [is] the successful passing of two carloads on a single line of tracks." Leap Frog cars were equipped with a pair of bent rails on their roofs that allowed approaching cars to glide over or under each other. Thirty-two frightened passengers would brace for a collision only for the

forthcoming car to pass overhead, and then change positions on the return trip so that the other car of passengers could get the thrill, too.

Deno's Wonder Wheel, Deno's Wonder Wheel Park, 1920. Originally called Dip-the-Dip. The earliest surviving eccentric Ferris wheel (that is, some of the passenger cars are not fixed directly to the rim of the wheel, but instead slide on rails as the wheel rotates). The only time the wheel has ever stopped unexpectedly was during the New York City summer blackout of 1977, when the conductors had to eschew the wheel's electrical system and hand-crank passengers down from the cars. Maintains a perfect safety record nonetheless.

The Funny Mirrors, Steeplechase Park, 1929. Revolving funhouse mirrors encircled by rails that gave visitors who leaned on them to get a better look at their distorted reflections a mild electrical shock. Seats in front of the mirrors would suddenly collapse four or five inches if under any pressure. A nearby stereoscopic viewer had a blowhole at its base, so women's dresses blew up when they looked at a picture. A sign above read, "Don't tell anyone!"

Old Mill, Luna Park, 1904. Tunnel of love.

The Human Pool Table, Steeplechase Park, 1908. A large, flat surface made up of twenty-four rotating discs, big enough for a rider or two each. Adjacent discs revolved in opposite directions. Riders attempting to cross the flat surface would lose their footing, spin this way and that, tripping and falling, and entangle their limbs with others doing the same. Those riders who

complained of friction burns were given first aid at the park's first aid office and reimbursed for any damaged clothing up to twenty dollars.

The Inexhaustible Cow, West Brighton, 1875. Designed by James L. Lafferty, the architect of the Elephantine Colossus. Parched guests could pull on an udder for a glass of water, milk, or champagne.

Coney Island Cyclone, Astroland, 1927. Wooden rollercoaster with an eighty-five-foot drop. Charles Lindbergh, the first person to make a solo, nonstop flight across the Atlantic Ocean, once said, "A ride on Cyclone is a greater thrill than flying an airplane at top speed." In 1997, at the Cyclone's seventieth anniversary celebration, one woman rode the coaster three hundred and eighty-one times consecutively; two actors, aged seventy-five and seventy-two, hired to marry and divorce over the course of one ride ended up falling in love with each other and refused to get divorced; and a man named Tino Wallenda walked a tightrope between the coaster's two highest points, stopping halfway to do a headstand. Over the course of over ninety years, there have been three accidental deaths on the Cyclone.

THE FREAK'S OBITUARY

1940

"Didn't you grow up on Coney Island?"

The yawning voice is casually curious; the question asked as though the answer is unimportant.

"No," you say, aligning the stack of typewritten sheets in your hands with one firm thump against the desk. Your shoulders stiffen as Ed leans closer to your hair.

"Must've been somebody else, then," he says, nearly in your ear, his breath scratching your cheek like sandpaper. Ed laughs at your expression of forced composure and falls into the chair across from you, spreading his legs so that each of his large, black leather shoes rests on the floor on either side of you. "Listen. Funeral for the fat lady tomorrow afternoon. Go to the beach, get an ice cream cone, schmooze with the freaks, whatever you have to do."

While he speaks your chest contracts, as though the tight grip of Ed's large hand is crushing your ribs, as though the tendons and vessels of your heart are seeping out between his thick fingers in grotesque bubbles till they burst.

"What about –" You gesture at the article you were working on in a desperate attempt at deflection, managing your breath with practiced proficiency. He glances at the title, *HENRY HOKE FIGHTS NAZI PROPAGANDA: PUBLISHER CHARGES U.S. MAIL FRAUDULENTLY USED BY GERMAN GOVERNMENT,* and shakes his head. His dark hair, made even darker with grease, is slicked down into a neat, frozen part.

Ed waves his hand at your typewriter with the dismissive air of someone for whom consequences have never been terribly severe. "It can wait. People are sick of all the bad news. Need a good laugh."

Only in wartime is a death a good laugh instead of bad news, you think. *Even in wartime is a woman with a journalism degree from Columbia relegated to the obituaries.*

Though you live only the breadth of the East River away, you never intended to return to Coney Island. The last time you were there is a haze of a childhood memory, manipulated by years of misremembrances and strangers' accounts that, in the way other people's recollections often do, permeated your own so that you can no longer tell the difference between them.

A pink knitted bonnet so small it could fit a child's doll, and perhaps did belong to a child's doll, once. A quarter passing hands. The mingled cooing of unfamiliar women. A nurse, a doctor, a crowd of spectators, and you, as delicate as a hummingbird.

You did not lie to Ed. Not really. For the truth was, you did not grow up on Coney Island. You were merely incubated there.

"And, kid?" Ed adds as he turns away, "That title's much too long."

When you arrive, Jolly Irene's effigy and her barker widow, George, greet you at the door. The oversized portrait is settled on a wooden easel, the fat lady looking over her shoulder with a coy smirk and vaulted, plucked eyebrows, her thick index finger caressing her heavy chin.

The service is an amalgamation of the sideshow's greatest and most cherished acts, all congregating in the dark, wood paneled room of a funeral home. You glance at the prayer card George hands you, the size and shape of a playing card, printed with a glossy image of the Virgin Mary.

Jolly Irene, real name Amanda Siebert, you jot down in your notebook. *Six hundred and eighty-nine pounds at death. Heart attack.*

A doublewide casket, propped open by its creaking hinges, is prominent at the front of the room and surrounded by the usual kinds of mourning flowers: paper white lilies and greenery in a tall spray, arranged into a crooked heart and labeled with a banner of script reading *BELOVED WIFE*; vases stuffed with red carnations and baby's breath; and a mess of yellow roses and gladiolas perched precariously on a replica of a Grecian column. The scent of the lilies, at first pleasant and fresh, devolves into a sickly-sweet perfume that overpowers you with its thick saccharine redolence like the tension of a fast-approaching deadline.

"I heard they had to put the coffin on its side to even get it through the door," you imagine someone saying, and then write that down, too. You can attribute the quote to an anonymous, grieving source, maybe sputtered breathlessly between sobs, maybe whispered conspiratorially with a knowing look. You can decide which later, when you return to Manhattan. You hope that this will be very soon.

You log notes about the guests lined up before Jolly Irene's body. The middle-aged Princess Marguerite, twenty-eight inches tall, sits on The Shadow's shoulders while he stands stock-still in a great imitation of his sideshow routine, in which he remains immobile for half a day or more; the white-haired Professor W. Heckler, his broad forehead glistening, the members of his flea circus hovering over the upturned cuff of his dinner coat, tenderly rests a hand on the Princess's back, the fleas flicking up his left arm in response; a trio of freaks, Lionel the lion-faced, Tony the alligator boy, and Libbera, whose porcelain-doll-like twin brother protrudes from his chest, quietly shuffle up to the casket and cross themselves in staggered succession with Liberra crossing himself twice; Rubberneck Harry, the boy with an elastic head, extends his neck to see over Libbera's shoulder but turns away soon after, as though unable to stand the sight; Electricia, the electric phenomenon, and her husband, Ho-Jo the bear boy, put their heads together and murmur to each other as they move up in the line of people waiting to pay their respects; the giantess Londy stands in a less-crowded corner of the room, unable to comfortably fit within the throng, though grateful that the aerial view of her friend's repose is clear and unimpeded; King Roy, the king of the albinos, a vision in a tar-black suit, floats forward in slow, graceful movements while the champion strong man Spike Howard's biceps undulate as he trembles with unbridled sobs; and Madame Adrienie, the Hungarian bearded lady with a thick accent and a rosy, protuberant nose, approaches you.

She takes your hand in both of hers and you try not to squirm out of her firm grasp. "How did you know the deceased?" she asks kindly.

You stutter, unsure of what to say. "I – I'm –" You trail off and shake your head, and the bearded lady mistakes your anxiety-induced speechlessness for grief.

"It's okay, dear," she says, squeezing your hand. "She would be happy that you're here."

Not for the first time, you feel a dense lump of discomfort in the back of your throat. You swallow, hard, discreetly hiding your pen and notebook out of sight.

Suddenly, the blaring sound of trumpets overpowers the service's low conversations. “What’s going on?" you ask. A marching band enters the room, followed by a hot dog cart with screeching wheels.

"These were her wishes," says Madame Adrienie, smiling. "She always threw the best parties."

"They didn't call her 'jolly' for nothing," says a man with dark tattoos crawling up his neck. He throws an arm around Madame Adrienie and they beam at each other, through a light film of tears that haven't fallen yet. Then, along with the rest of the guests, they join the back of the procession in marching about the formerly solemn room, kicking out their legs and singing "Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland" as though it's a joyous, out-of-tune dirge.

Though if someone asks you will insist that you've never heard this song before, the melody has a certain familiarity, the kind of familiarity that sometimes makes you stop in your tracks because, for just a second, a breeze blew by that smells exactly like your mother's warmth or a place you haven't been to in a long, long time.

It's true, for you have experienced the phenomenon before, that you know things that you can't describe, that you can't say for sure you really know: the smell of toast, how to hold a pen. They have become so ingrained in your memory that relating them would be like telling a blind person what blue looks like. You could describe the ocean, the way its waves break against the sand and rush back as though fearful of being so far away, how, no matter how

warm the water is, you'll get a real chill on your arms and shoulders if it isn't deep enough to submerge them. But there are things about blue, about toast, about pens, that you have become so accustomed to that you have forgotten, that you have taken for granted their workings, almost as though these once simple, fathomable things have become well-kept secrets.

All around you, the freaks are ending their song in histrionic tenors:

Come with the love-light gleaming

In your dear eyes of blue.

Meet me tonight in Dreamland,

Sweet, dreamy Dreamland,

There let my dreams come true.

A brief image of blue eyes shining down at you from behind circular black glasses passes through your mind. The blue eyes do not look away as the doctor gathers you in his arms and rushes out of the *LIVING BABIES IN INCUBATORS!* exhibit while the great Dreamland fire of 1911 rages all around you.

The next day, The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children takes you away from the doctor with the blue eyes, and you grow up trying to forget that you, like the people surrounding you now, are a freak.

Though often lugubrious, The Incubator Doctor sometimes had fits of good humor. In these moments, he was delightfully self-deprecating, mussing his thinning hair and teasing in a

throaty German accent that he only had a deep stoop in his back because of a lifetime of bending over premature babies. The doctors and nurses admired him greatly and visiting medical students would often lean in closer to better hear what he had to say.

Your parents couldn't afford the intensive care you needed at any of New York's hospitals, so a doctor recommended Dr. Martin Couney. *He will take care of the baby for free,* the doctor had said, *so long as you allow people to come in and take a look.*

After the fire, a newspaper reported that six of the babies were killed. They retracted that the next day, for Dr. Couney had saved them all, you included, but the reputation of the sideshow clinic was irrevocably damaged.

It's never mattered to you that you most likely wouldn't have survived without Dr. Couney. The only thing that matters is that it set you apart in a way you didn't choose, wouldn't have chosen if you could've had a say. You were made to be no different from a fat lady, albeit quite the opposite at just three pounds and two ounces, and it has followed you from Coney Island, to Columbia, and to the news office. You try to be normal, to belong, to fit in. To seem like you're a part of the world on the other side of the river. But your past is an irrepressible part of you, and no matter how hard you try, you've never been able to leave Coney Island. Not really.

And when you found out that Dr. Couney didn’t have a single medical degree to his name, like the rest of New York City, you felt betrayed.

The sooner I get what I need, the sooner I can leave this place, you tell yourself. You'll leave and go back to Ed and the others, who stand too close to you in the elevator and assign you soft stories.

You move to pull out your notebook and take down the details of the morbid merriment, but Madame Adrienie is back at your side, pulling you to the hot dog cart.

"Here," says the bearded lady. "Have some Coney Island caviar." She holds out a hot dog smothered in sauerkraut.

You don't take it. She looks from your austere gaze to the sauerkraut. "You're one of those, huh?" She laughs and takes a bite. A shred of the ghostly cabbage dangles from the coarse red fur surrounding her mouth. "They even changed the name of Feltman's Deutscher Garden. Silly, if you ask me. But they still eat hot dogs by the bucketful, no war's ever gonna change that."

The funeralgoers' gaiety swirls around you in an unyielding cycle of laughter and song. You move away from the bearded lady and find yourself at the foot of Jolly Irene's coffin.

"Did you hear that Ringling tried to put her in the animal cart?" Londy, who is towering near you, says. "That's when she came here. I wouldn't have stood for that kind of disrespect either."

"Just terrible," Electricia responds. "Just terrible."

You look down into the casket. Someone has taken one of the white lilies and put it behind Jolly Irene's ear. Her expression is gentle, sweet.

"I'm gonna enlist," Lionel says from the other side of the coffin, stroking the mane of fair hair covering the entirety of his face. "I'm just worried my fur'll get singed off."

"Wish I could enlist," replies Liberra.

Lionel laughs. "You'd have to get your uniform specially made," he says, and Liberra laughs too, a tender hand resting on his twin brother.

The fat lady wears a white silk dress, like a bride, but shorter, ending at her thighs. Stockings stretched tight and pulled up to her knees feature hand-painted butterflies. You surprise yourself when you think how lovely she looks.

George, her husband, approaches the casket. He's long, thin, and lanky and seems as though he's never quite gotten accustomed to his gangly limbs. "It's time," he says. You glance at him, but find he isn't speaking to you. Rather, he is looking at the figure lying on the ivory satin upholstery, the faint glimmer of expectation in his face, as though she might say something back. He stretches out a bony hand to touch her cheek and you have to look away.

The giantess, the strongman, the alligator boy, and the king of the albinos act as the pallbearers. They try to heave the coffin onto their shoulders but it's too heavy, and so the tattooed man, the bearded lady, the lion-faced boy, and The Shadow join in. Soon, nearly everyone at the service has a finger grazing the coffin, trying to be helpful as all people – freaks included, it seems – try to be after a death. Eventually, even you try to help negotiate the casket out of the funeral home, moved in spite of your reservations by Jolly Irene’s veritable parade of pallbearers.

All are quiet upon seeing the hearse. The innumerable pallbearers lower the casket and begin loading the fat lady into the deep, hollow trunk.

A group of young Coney Island visitors, hair still sopping, stop as they pass the hearse. "Look at that, Emily! Isn't that the biggest casket you've ever seen?"

"Just a bunch of Lookie Lous," says the tattooed man. "Ignore them." The pallbearers are still struggling with the weight; sweat is dripping from Professor Heckler's forehead.

"Must have been a real cow," says one of the boys.

Another boy points at Princess Marguerite with no attempt to be subtle. "I think this might be a freak show funeral!" he exclaims, and they all erupt into laughter.

"Goodness, would you look at them!"

"What in the world is coming out of that man's chest?"

"It looks like a doll in a suit jacket!"

"Hasn't that one ever heard of a *razor*?"

"And that one could use a tan!"

You have been rendered immobile with horror. The others continue their task, disregarding the troublemakers. You partially expect George, whose shoulders have tightened, or the strongman Spike Howard, whose face is flushed, to throw a punch, but no one does. You imagine Ed, his gelled hair made even darker by the appearance of dampness, standing with the teenagers, jeering.

But the freaks, like you, have learned to control their emotions.

Eventually, the kids get bored and move on, exhausted and prickling from too much sun and not wanting to miss the subway home.

You slip away before they begin the motorcade to the cemetery and watch from afar as the convoy of black cars drives away.

This is the obituary that you write:

THE FUNERAL OF JOLLY IRENE:

HUMANITY IS AN ATTRACTION AT CONEY ISLAND

For forty years, Dr. Martin Couney, also known as The Incubator Doctor, saved thousands of premature babies from premature death.

Previously considered too weak to treat, and then too expensive to care for, premature babies were sent from New York's finest hospitals to Dr. Couney's seaside Infant Incubator exhibit, where a sign above the door read, *ALL THE WORLD LOVES A BABY.* He didn't charge the parents a penny for the care he and a team of doctors and nurses offered, but spectators who paid twenty-five cents each to see the little miracles kept them well provided for.

Dr. Couney wasn't formally trained. He wasn't a professor or a surgeon. He was a German immigrant who believed in something no one else did. They called him a charlatan. They condemned him. But Dr. Couney was neither a charlatan, nor deserving of condemnation.

Dr. Couney was a freak, of the highest caliber.

Coney Island is famous for its freaks. Visitors from all over the world escape the humdrum of their normal lives to spend a day in Dreamland, where not even their wildest dreams could predict what they are about to see and experience. Certainly no one expects that the freaks they traveled miles to see are more appropriate specimens of humanity than themselves.

Jolly Irene was born Amanda Siebert. At her death, she was six hundred and eighty-nine pounds. She died from a heart attack.

But she was also a beloved wife. Friend. She knew how it felt not to be accepted by others, and instead of letting this sour her perspective on the world, she became more accepting herself. She, like her fellow performers, was often treated with disrespect and mockery. In fact, this reporter was sent to her funeral to make fun of the proceedings, to provide some "light" reading amid all of the news of war and violence and fear.

It is fear of difference that has gotten everyone into this terrible mess. And the only individuals who refuse to be a part of this historic prejudice are the freaks.

Acceptance is not a distant dream. It does not have a certain shape, nor does it have barriers to entry. It is there for all, across the river, with an ocean view.

This is the obituary that is published:

FAT LADY DEAD AT CONEY ISLAND

Weighing in at over seven hundred pounds, Jolly Irene, the fat lady in The Dreamland Sideshow, was buried today in a *colossal* funeral service. Spectators report that the casket was so big it wouldn't fit in the hearse. Might be time to start those diets, ladies!

THE DEMOLITION PARTY

1966

Your wife, an iron quivering in her hand, presses the pleats in your pants while you adjust your tie in the mirror. You are the picture of professionalism, though below your waist you wear only Jockey shorts. The engraved invitation to the V.I.P. Farewell Ceremony is in the inside pocket of your sports jacket. You have carried the invitation everywhere since it arrived in the mail a month prior.

"Should I call a car?" you ask your wife.

She holds the iron up to her chest as she looks at you and the rising steam swells about her face. "What about your car?"

"The other men will have chauffeurs."

"Isn't that expensive?" she asks.

"After today," you say, examining your mustache, "we won't have to worry about that anymore." You grin at your wife in the mirror, then at yourself.

For a moment, your wife looks at herself, a small figure at the edge of the mirror's frame, her reflection overwhelmed by your own. Her hand rests on the ironing board, carefully holding a fold in place. The iron descends, and she shrieks.

"What happened?" you demand, rushing to her. She is cradling one hand in the other, a nested clump held tightly at her waist. Her face is flushed.

"It's so silly – I'm fine –"

You force her hands apart and survey the damage. The wound looks like the flesh of a baby bird, pink and raw. Dead skin has peeled away and clustered around the burn in a halo. "I'm fine," she says again.

"We're both nervous today," you say as you kiss her index finger, a reflection of your cheek fleetingly visible in its glossy red nail. "Take a look at these." She watches as you pull several pencils out of your jacket. "Got them specially made. Look."

Each pencil gleams in his palm with unmistakable newness, a city of hexagonal edges and unused lead tips waiting patiently for that which might be worth writing down. She takes one in her uninjured hand and inspects it. "Trump Management," your wife reads aloud.

"Looks good, doesn't it? Just think," you tell her. "Soon this'll all be over and maybe we can finally go on our honeymoon." She smiles, her eyes brightening with mischief. "What?" you ask.

"Not to Coney Island," she says, and you laugh.

"You wouldn't have wanted to go there, anyway, you know. Robert Moses says it's for low-class sorts of people," you say, turning back to the mirror.

Your wife raises a manicured eyebrow but says nothing. She knows you won't like being reminded of the man you were when you married her, so instead she adjusts the belt of her housecoat and thinks of the man who gave her a piano they couldn't afford instead of a honeymoon, the man who could listen to her play it for hours, the man who sold it last year because the invention of fiber-tip pens was putting him out of business.

"Do you smell that?" you ask suddenly. "It's like burning rubber." Your wife turns and gasps, seizing the iron from where it had dropped, flat, against a pant leg. She tears a long black

cord out of the wall and its metal prongs dart along the carpet toward her feet. Smoke is rising in wisps from a ravaged hole in your pants. You lean over them and trace the hole while ashes of charred cloth blow away, stirred by the force of your breath.

Sometime later, when your town car arrives, you are wearing your second-best pair of pants and your wife has never looked so afraid of you.

The chauffeur opens your door as a glossy blue Cadillac pulls up alongside the hired car. A tall man with thick eyebrows and a receding hairline turns off the ignition and looks at you through the window while he cranks it open. "I never get out of the backseat of another man's car, myself," he says.

"Mr. Trump," you say. You reach out to shake his hand, but he takes his time exiting the Cadillac, forcing you to drop your arm. The air smells salty and a cool breeze relieves your forehead from a burning heat that began on the drive to the southernmost limit of Brooklyn.

"Beautiful day," Mr. Trump says at last. He looks out to the sea, his hands in his pockets save his fidgeting thumbs.

Your lips quiver in anticipation, unsure whether or not to smile. "A gift from my factory," you say quickly, extracting the pencils. "Thank you for the invitation."

"Ah." He rotates one very close to his eyes and reads the inscription. "Well, that's very nice," he says, and puts them in his pocket. "I'll have to send one to my son. He just started at Wharton, you know."

You don't know what this is.

"Congratulations," you say.

Several other men arrive and together they walk to the park's entrance, laughing loudly and grasping each other's shoulders in turn. You reach the gate and introductions are made. Eye contact between you and the others lasts only for the length of a handshake.

"The pencil industry, interesting," one man says. "I prefer pens, myself."

Mr. Trump hears this and responds coolly. "My father used pencils, and his father used pencils," he says. "I'm not interested in any newfangled technology."

The other man laughs. "Fred," he says, "a pen's no flying car." The corners of Mr. Trump's mouth lift slightly, as though the smile is merely a polite gesture rather than a genuine expression.

Looking at the entrance to Steeplechase Park, it is easy to imagine its former grandeur. At the center of an unceasing line of tall columns is a marble arch topped with majestic white horses that buck and rear as though frozen in the middle of a great battle. The park's sign is made of stained glass, announcing its name and its mascot, an impish boy with a hundred-tooth grin whose leer promises something more than innocent amusement.

"Let's get started, shall we, boys?" Mr. Trump says, handing each of his guests one dense red brick from a pile sitting in front of the gate.

You weigh your brick in your hands, feeling the rough exterior with the soft pads of your thumbs. You hear some of the men hooting and look up to see models skipping toward Mr. Trump. All four girls wear pristine white hardhats. Two wear polka-dotted bikinis.

A photographer snaps a picture of Mr. Trump posing in front of the girls, leaning forward as though about to strike with his sledgehammer. The girls tip their hardhats and Mr. Trump grins sideways. The burning pop of the flash illuminates the scene and Mr. Trump turns back to his guests.

The models begin passing out flutes of champagne. You take one, cautiously grasping the delicate stem.

"A toast," Mr. Trump suggests. The men wait for a moment but upon realizing that he has nothing else to say, begin laughing jovially, shout "hear, hear!" and clink their glasses as though he has said something hilarious yet momentous.

And then, without further preamble, Mr. Trump hurls his brick at the glass entranceway. It soars through Steeplechase's grinning face, breaking his teeth into hundreds of glass shards that clatter onto the sidewalk with the tinkling melody of teacups clanging against each other. Without his trademark smirk, the boy's gaze becomes menacing, as though he is sneering at you from above.

The others follow suit, hurling their bricks into the park's old sign with the careless vigor of a faulty pitching machine at the batting cages. The Steeplechase Funny Face crumbles before you in a disturbing sequence of shattering features until only the left eye remains, dangling by a piece of glass as thin and sharp as an icicle.

You realize that everyone has thrown his brick but you. They goad you to go straight for the eye, but you aim too high, your brick bouncing against the heavy marble above the sign to return with a resounding thud to the pavement, and the eye endures, allowed to see the ocean for another day.

Cheeks reddening, condescending claps thumping against your back, you follow the party into the park, sidestepping pieces of fragmented glass, to find a grand buffet in the former Pavilion of Fun, an enormous glass building that stretches across the park. Dozens of raw oysters sit in beds of ice, decorated with a symmetrical design of lemons cut into perfect quarters. A full bar, tended by a pretty young girl with a clear, faintly pink face in another pristine white hardhat, attracts a crowd immediately. Sledgehammers are displayed like desserts, laid out on a tablecloth.

The vestiges of the Pavilion still remain: an abandoned ticket booth, advertising twenty-five attractions for twenty-five cents; the Human Roulette Wheel, which whirled and spun

riders around and around till they flew off in a fit of giggles and intertwined limbs; and a sign, gently swaying beside the wheel, that offered a prize to any rider who stayed on the wheel for at least three minutes. On a stage in the center of the Pavilion, the remnants of a bandstand sit untouched and desolate, including several music stands, metal chairs, and the instruments and equipment that were too heavy to move: a trio of timpani, a massive amplifier, and a piano. Through the glass walls, you can see the empty track of the Steeplechase Horse Race looping and curving about the exterior of the Pavilion.

Having finished at the bar, the other men are examining the sledgehammers, holding the wooden handles at their shoulders like rifles and scrutinizing the flat metal heads with expert seriousness that you suspect is exaggerated.

"Very good quality," one man says, and the others agree in a sudden cacophony of amicable murmurings, as though they were all waiting for someone else to express an opinion that they could approve.

They hold the sledgehammers for a few more dry conversations, slurping oyster meat in between their teeth with sucking gulps. The models are doing a jazzy dance routine with their hardhats acting as props. You watch the sun slowly drift into the horizon as the sky deepens into the pure Parrish blue of textbook twilights through the Pavilion's endless windows and wish that your wife was here. She likes oysters. You do not.

When the electric lights strung across the ceiling of the Pavilion flick on, shedding warm yellow light across the old amusement park, Mr. Trump grasps his sledgehammer and, with a mighty swing that cuts through the air, indicates that the demolition party has begun in earnest.

You retrieve one of the few remaining sledgehammers. Its handle is cool against your palm, and you must balance your grip to avoid the heavy metal head from tilting downward. You feel like the new recruit, joining the high school football team midseason.

A crash resounds behind you and you turn to find that one of the men has burst his sledgehammer through one of the many glass windows making up the Pavilion's walls, to the enthusiastic applause of the models. For a moment a briny draft rushes through the jagged hole and the hair on your knuckles stands on end.

You consider how things that take such effort to build are so easy to destroy, like a sandcastle or a cabin made of Lincoln Logs, but have no epiphanies or revelations on the matter.

The party erupts into an orchestra of thwacks and strikes, blowing through Steeplechase with relentless collisions between the sledgehammers' sharp heads and the relics of a stranger place and time.

At one of the Pavilion's entrances is the Barrel of Fun, a hollow wooden barrel that rotated when guests tried to enter, causing them to thrash and tumble against each other. You approach it, gazing up at its impressive height. Mr. Trump is watching you, his eyebrows arched in question, a proctor for a sort of test you never had to take in school. You raise a hand to the concave ceiling of the barrel, extending your elbow, and find that you can just reach.

"Go ahead, son," Mr. Trump says. "You're at a party."

You imagine your sledgehammer pressing itself through a crate full of Paper Mate Flairs, splitting the plastic of each cigar-shaped pen apart with a squirting deluge of multicolored ink. With your eyes still narrowed in concentration, the weight of the sledgehammer pulls you

forward like a big dog on a leash and you laugh, a deep, robust laugh that surges unexpectedly from the recesses of your abdomen. Splinters of wood are scattered around your feet.

"That's the boy," Trump says, and claps you on the back.

The Pavilion of Fun has changed drastically since you and the others arrived. Shards and splinters litter the floor. The cold night seeps in through numerous holes in the windows. Wiring and parts poke out from rides, revealing the gray, mechanical underbelly of the colorfully painted attractions.

Adrenaline is preventing the soreness in your right arm from reaching your nerve endings. The endless champagne and whiskey in your glass help deter the pain, too. You learn to lift the sledgehammer high above your head and crash it down in what soon becomes a familiar process. With a quick grin, you take part in the destruction of the Venetian Gondolas, the Cave of Winds, the Human Pool Table, the South Pole, the Soup Bowl, the Golden Stairs, the Air-Ships, the Glass Works, and the indoor Ferris Wheel.

Mr. Trump announces that the payloader will be arriving soon to finish the job. The sky has become a black tarp overhead, still and starless by the artificial light carrying over from Manhattan. There is little left to destroy, and so the party reluctantly moves to return their sledgehammers.

"Wait, Fred, we've left the piano!" one man says, gesturing to the decrepit piano that sits, at an angle, on the right of the main stage. "I'll take care of it." Everyone starts to argue as though the piano is the last piece of pumpkin pie on the Thanksgiving table.

"I say we give it to the newcomer," one of the men says loudly. The party quiets, looks to Mr. Trump, and waits.

He regards you. "Go ahead, son," he says again.

You climb the steps to the stage with mild trepidation, the sledgehammer swinging from your hand. You have mastered the weight distribution now, adjusted to the balance, and after so many hours of wielding it, the sledgehammer feels like an extension of your arm.

The piano is a baby grand, stained a light brown. The keys, once a stark white, have yellowed with overuse. The scratched wooden case protecting the soundboard is propped open, revealing the complex machinations within. A musty odor is emanating from the lines of strings and hammers.

You envision fiber-tip pens lying across the piano's keys, jutting out from between the taut strings, under the felt-padded hammers. You raise the sledgehammer above your head, the muscles in your shoulders contracting and rolling, and start to bring it down.

In an instant, the image of fiber-tip pens is replaced by pale, graceful fingers tipped with burnished red nails, arranged to play a chord. They are long and slender, moving lithely across the yellowing keys, playing a song you cannot hear. You stop the sledgehammer's descent abruptly, sending a tremor throughout your spine at the force of the shock.

You quickly look over your shoulder to discover that most of the party has lost interest. They are talking among themselves, laughing and sucking on the leftover lemons. Only Mr. Trump's attention is directed to the stage, so with a staggering breath you turn back to the piano, your hand cramping against the wooden handle.

There is no one there. You think you must have had too much whiskey; the evening's events have been exhausting, and perhaps you even start to feel a searing pain rush through your arm.

Once again you raise the sledgehammer, your breath quickening. A figure appears on the worn leather piano bench and turns to face you, regarding you openly, though her hands continue to play, dancing along the keys. Your eyes widen, fear engulfing your consciousness, and almost hesitate, but Mr. Trump's gaze is burning through the spot on the back of your head where your hair has thinned.

In one swift movement, you bring the sledgehammer down on the piano and onto your wife's hands, slicing off her fingers. Her wedding ring slips off the severed digit and falls, spinning, to the ground, where dark and viscous brown fluid replaces the candy-colored inks of previous.

A moment later, Mr. Trump kneels to the floor and picks something up. He holds it up to inspect it, and it glints at you as he turns it in his hand.

"That's the boy," he says, again.

It is a few weeks later and your wife is taking a Jell-O mold the sickly color of The Great Garloo and topped with tuna fish salad out of the brand-new Frigidaire. She offers Mr. Trump a slice and he accepts.

"I received the pencil shipment at the new office yesterday," he is telling you. "Very satisfactory." He is sitting on the edge of the mustard-colored settee in your parlor, leaning forward with his hands grasped in front of his face and his elbows resting on his knees.

"I'm glad to hear it," you say, and you are.

Mr. Trump reaches into the inside pocket of his suit and retrieves a thin slip of paper. "Your check. I'm sure you will find everything as it should be." He places it lightly on the coffee table that separates you.

"Thank you. I appreciate your business." You glance at the table, your eyes roaming - imperceptibly, you hope – over the check. "I – I think you may have made a mistake, Mr. Trump. I don't think – that is not the agreed upon number, I don't think."

Mr. Trump looks at you, his gaze unwavering.

Seconds pass. "Can I get you something to drink, Mr. Trump?" your wife asks with obligatory cheeriness, though the slice of Jell-O salad is untouched. "Beer? Wine? Iced tea?"

Mr. Trump looks at her and smiles. "Iced tea sounds refreshing, thank you." Your wife withdraws to the kitchen. You can hear the thud of a cabinet closing a moment later.

You lean forward. "Did you hear me, Mr. Trump? I think there's been a mistake."

His posture remains steadfast. "There's been no mistake, son," he responds evenly.

"But this – this is less than *half* the agreed upon amount," you say. Your confusion mounts until it effervesces into concentrated stings that dash in, out, and between your ribs. The fishy odor of low tide and lime gelatin pricks at your nostrils.

"I don't think so," he says. A slight movement catches your attention underneath his head. You interrupt the eye contact with the businessman to see his thumbs twitching against each other at his vest.

Your wife enters the living room with an emerald green glass full of iced tea. Condensation slowly, agonizingly drips down the sides of the glass. She places it on a coaster and, encouraged by the force of her movements, a droplet rushes to the coffee table and begins to disperse, slipping off the coaster and spreading onto the wood grain.

"Well," says Mr. Trump, starting to stand. "I must be going. Very busy."

"But you haven't –" your wife begins, gesturing to the Jell-O salad, her trademark red manicure glistening, but quiets when you rest a hand on her elbow.

You stand. "Goodbye, Mr. Trump," you say.

"Goodbye," he says, pleasantly.

Behind you, the droplet slides over the edge of the coffee table and, in a desperate gesture, plunges to the carpet with a muted splash.

THE MERMAID PARADE

PRESENT

You see him pinched in between a large-chested woman dressed as an octopus, Victory rolls in her hair, and a half-naked man who has been painted to look as though he is covered in shimmering scales made of galaxies rather than skin.

No, never mind. That's not him.

Is that him, there, in the line trailing outside Nathan's? No, that's not *him*, just someone else, someone else with curly dark hair and an easy grin.

At one of the restaurants that open out onto the boardwalk, you buy a basket of fried clams because that's the closest thing they have to a bowl of clam chowder and, as you tell the indifferent waitress, “Melville ate clam chowder at Coney Island once." You are squeezed in at the bar, crammed amid sloshing plastic cups of amber crowned with foam, watching the parade as it ambles past Ruby's.

A gaggle of girls twirl clear umbrellas, stapled translucent ribbon and cellophane dangling to their knees and glitter scattering from their hair as they stroll across the boardwalk like Victorian ladies holding parasols. A solitary, paunchy man combing his frizzy red wig with an oversized fork marches slowly behind them, stopping intermittently as onlookers call out for a photograph. An older woman with thick silver hair wearing a classic black dress and a tiara points a long cigarette holder and turns to show off the shark fin protruding from her back.

The bar smells like spilled beer and oil that's been burning at the bottom of the deep fryer for a century. You ask for a fork and knife, but Ruby's doesn't have any cloth napkins. A

scratchy, red paper napkin tucked into your high collar, you deliberately cut each of the fried clams in half then neatly rest the knife on the plate, as your grandmother taught you, so that they don't clink against each other and call attention, though the bar is so noisy that you had to repeat your order for the indifferent waitress more than once.

Your jaw grows sore with chewing and so you fold a few bills, nestling them under a heavy saltshaker on the counter, and abandon the basket, lined with grease-stained red paper, though it's still almost full.

High noon is approaching, the sun angled above your head and the sky a cloudless cornflower petal. You follow the parade backwards, eyes darting over each face as they meander by you with the slow, effusive gait that is universal among parade marchers. The throng is unfathomable, a deep-sea cavern of strange creatures, ultraviolet light, and adorned hands fluttering against the warmth.

The air tastes stale and damp. Ghostly maelstroms of heat are surging from the dark cement below your feet. The ivory lace of your sleeves sticks to your arms and dark curls moistened by perspiration lie flush against the back of your neck. Your leather, lace-up boots, knotted tight above your ankles, and the thick stockings underneath slip against your warm, wet skin. A cold nausea rushes through your gut as your thoughts morph into thick, sticking molasses, trudging and slogging against each other like when you're awakened in the heart of a deep sleep.

An earnest, bellowing laugh erupts from your right, stirring you like the trill of an alarm.

That's him, you think, languidly, as the side of your head cracks against the cement sidewalk.

You were thoughtful and quiet as a child, qualities that have only increased in intensity over the years to include an otherworldly strangeness that is often assigned to adolescents who never seemed to outgrow shyness. The sweltering months would find you and your little sister at the public pool, where a teenager in a red bathing suit would flip her ponytail and another teenager in red swimming trunks would look over, ignoring the children that raced along the pool's slick borders.

The pool was cavernous, the domed ceiling composed of tiles in paint sample series of green-blue shades. Chlorine, the olfactory harbinger of summer, drifted out onto the baking sidewalk, where you and your little sister would hop, barefoot, in a reverse game of hot potato that ended in blisters, ice packs, and obstinate whining.

Your little sister, whose easy confidence had always eclipsed your reticence, adored shouting into the hollow abyss of the public pool, her head thrown back, her arms rigid, straight, and drawn down by her sides as though gravity had a particular hold on them, her hands balled into tight fists with the effort of her eerie, wraithlike scream. As the scream resonated throughout the pool, the lifeguards' calls of irritation echoing soon after, you would sink, deep, into the far end, where your little sister, a weak swimmer, wasn't yet allowed to go.

It takes practice to avoid the body's natural inclination to float. A series of careful, measured descents. Stasis. The mere flick of one's pinky finger could upset the balance. The secret – don’t panic.

Don't panic, as the heightened pressure of pool water sets in on you; don't panic, as the muddled voices from above become gurgling, imperceptible tones; don't panic, as the impulse to open your mouth and inhale, *hard*, nears the unbearable.

It takes practice.

When your palms touch the bottom of the pool, any residual anxiety subsides, as though at a certain depth you unknowingly crossed over from this world into a simpler one, as though you had been absorbed into a safer, sepia-toned universe, engulfed into a watery womb. The few minutes underwater feel like hours, hours of quiet introspection and slow examination, threads of suspended, coiled hair and wrinkled fingertips hovering before your eyes, the lightest shade of blue reflecting from the tile arches, and pervading, contented thoughtlessness.

Little feet, lightly kicking. Rising, infinitesimal bubbles, as small as the ones in your grandmother's chilled glass of sparkling white wine. Your little sister's hands, in loosening fists, as she sinks into your lap. You grasp her shoulders and forcibly turn her to face you, wanting to scold her, as the big sister does, for swimming where she's not allowed. Her hair is floating about her in a halo, fluorescence from above rendering the flaxen strands translucent. The whites of her eyes are reddening with branching streams of irritated veins. She gasps, with a singular, violent vomit of water back into itself.

Despite your careful practice, your mouth widens, releasing the tight seal of your lips, the taste of chemicals coating your tongue. And then you scream, a silent, staggering scream that rushes to the surface of the pool, escorted by a cacophony of pulsating bubbles.

For one guilty, fragile moment, you are glad that you fainted, like when you sprained your ankle in elementary school and had to use crutches for an entire week. It was something to talk about, or, more appreciably, something for your classmates to talk to you about.

That's when you met Samuel Ephraim Fishel, the short, round boy with curly dark hair and an easy smile who volunteered to carry your books between classes. A clown when left to his own devices, when given a task Sam became intensely focused, charmingly serious in the way of children. As such, the undertaking of your care was treated like the most somber responsibility ever bestowed upon a Fishel man in known history.

For five precious days, you were that which around Sam's life revolved, from the morning late bell to dismissal at three in the afternoon. For one treasured week, you woke in the morning with uncharacteristic enthusiasm for the coming school day, eager in that sleepless, quivering way students often only are on the day of the long-anticipated field trip to the Central Park Zoo.

Since then, Sam has stretched like pulled taffy, his elbows, shoulders, and knees jutting out from under his skin. His dark hair, once a long mess of corkscrews, is now cropped and hidden under a blue Mets cap. His eyes illuminate as yours flutter open, and he pushes his hat up to sheepishly rub at his stunted curls before pulling the hat back down and obscuring half his face in shadow.

He guides you to a picnic table with an empty bench in a nonstop torrent of chatter. "I saw someone go down like a tree and I was like, wait, I know her! You were only out for a couple seconds though." He waves to two red plastic platters overflowing with hot dogs, French fries, and condiments packets. "They let me cut that super long line at Nathan's when I said I

was getting water for a girl who'd fainted," he adds through a mouthful of hot dog. "So I got a bunch of other stuff too. Pretty sweet, right? The others wanted to go ride the Cyclone but I don't like the drop so I stayed behind to make sure you were okay. Besides, I was hungry."

"The others?" you say. Your voice is a croak, your mouth dry, as though it is the first time you've spoken all day. You take a water bottle from one of the trays. Sam holds out a hot dog and looks disappointed when you shake your head.

"You sure?" he says. "They taste even better than usual 'cause I got to cut the line. They're line-cutting, girl-fainting hot dogs. The best kind there is." The way Sam speaks to you is as though no time has passed, although there are traces of manhood on his jaw and in his irises.

You laugh, even though he's talking with his mouth full and you can see every chewed morsel of bread and meat as they disperse and congeal against his teeth. The cold condensation streaming down the plastic bottle is a relief against your palms.

"I'll have a French fry," you say quietly.

"That's my girl!" Sam says. You hurriedly rest the glacial water bottle against your cheek to assuage the inevitable blush. The sensation is cathartic.

You don't need to ask for a utensil; the fries come with a miniature, two-tonged, red fork. You stab one of the crinkle-cut fries in its center and bite the right half clean off. The soft, steaming potato explodes against the roof of your mouth.

"Good, right?" Sam asks. "So, who'd you come with? I didn't see your dad anywhere."

You swallow. You think you may have burned the roof of your mouth. "I didn't come with anyone," you say. You can hear that your voice sounds altogether too formal.

"You're here all by yourself?" he says. His eyebrows furrow in concern, a shallow wrinkle materializing in the groove that has formed between them. For a wild, desperate moment, you hate him. You wish you hadn't come; you wish you hadn't overheard Sam and his friends say that *they* were coming. You hate the Mermaid Parade. It's stupid.

You hate that Harry Houdini fell in love on Coney Island. You hate that you know this. You hate that you thought it might happen to you. Stupid.

You hate your father. You hate your grandmother. You hate your little sister, fearless and confident and dead and stupid.

A hand rests on your elbow. You glare at it, then follow its hirsute, browned arm to Sam's face, where the anger falls out of you at the sight of his untarnished boyishness like rotted teeth.

"Hey," he says. "Are you okay? I forgot to ask. After you fainted."

"Yes," you say, compulsively, without contemplating the question.

"I gotta go meet my friends," he says. You let out a breath you had been holding tight in your throat, loosening the pressure against your yearning chest in disappointed but resigned acknowledgement. Then, Sam says, "Wanna walk over to the Cyclone with me?"

Your lips part in surprise. "Yes," you say, again.

"I think that guy was the deejay at my bar mitzvah," Sam whispers, nudging your side and pointing to a homeless man who has a bulky garbage bag full of glass and plastics slung over his shoulder. He ambles across the sand picking up litter. Sunbathers on their towels or under their umbrellas look away as he passes by. You look away, too.

"I wasn't invited to your bar mitzvah," you say.

Sam looks uncomfortable. "I mean, yeah, it was a few years ago, and I didn't know if you would've wanted to come or anything. It was right after, you know, and you weren't talking to me or anybody much anymore so I just figured you wouldn't have wanted to come or anything."

"I would have wanted to come," you say, softly.

Sam shakes his head. "It was stupid for me to bring it up. Sorry." He checks his phone, determinedly not looking at you.

The boardwalk is still pulsing with people. The sun won't go down for several hours yet, and everyone is still soaking in the perfect summer day, scarred by the year's harsh winter and determined to squeeze every last bit of daylight out of the Mermaid Parade. You remember hearing that it had rained the year before and the turnout was bad. Really bad. Shut-down-the-parade bad.

You look out over the parks. They sit behind the restaurants and shops on the boardwalk, poking out from behind roofs and neon signs. Orange and white rollercoaster tracks cut through the sky. A rushing blur of screams and upstretched arms passes over them every so often.

Walking next to Sam, you feel like one of the twofold circles of a Venn diagram, the sliver of overlapping oval between you opening a portal so that you can each have a foot in the other's world. But just a foot.

You test the distance from your shoulder to his. In the swarm, it is easy to bump into him. He'll think you were jostled from the other side, or maybe he'll hope you did it on purpose.

Sam looks up from his phone and stops walking. "They decided to ride it again. Apparently the line's really long." He sighs and looks up, squinting at the sun's glare. He pushes his hat up again to rub at his hair before pulling it back down. As though he's determining what to do, he rests his hands on his hips and looks about himself. You follow his gaze to a red and green Ferris wheel made of twirling concentric rings that towers over the parks.

"That doesn't have a drop," he says, the corners of his lips whirling into a smile. "I've never been on the Wonder Wheel."

The Wonder Wheel's cars feel more like birdcages when you're locked within one. There are two benches inside, big enough for at least four passengers, but the ride's operator latches the door with just you and Sam inside. You sit on the same bench, and, while you wait for the ride to start, you watch his sneakered feet tap nervously next to yours, which are still and, especially next to Sam's, look like an image from an old photograph. You retie the laces on your boots so as not to be too obvious.

"I don't usually go on any rides," he says. His foot tapping is a staccato soundtrack. Though the car is only hovering above the ground, allowing other riders to get on, he is clutching the red metal bar beside him, the color draining from his face.

Though it's not the same as having a boy in your room with the door closed, which your grandmother has outlawed despite you never having invited a boy home before, you feel a twinge of exhilaration to be in such close quarters with Sam. The lattice of bars that encloses you is like a two-way mirror; even though anyone outside can see you, it feels very much like they can't.

The ascent begins in earnest. You sit with your ankles crossed and your back straight. Suddenly, the car plunges forward and Sam's arms flail, reaching aimlessly.

"Oh, god," he moans, closing his eyes as the car dips forward on a track and then sways backward with the momentum. It soon stabilizes and continues rising.

"Okay," Sam says. "Okay."

"Did you know that the cars swing?" you ask, mildly alarmed and unsure of what to do besides fix your posture.

"Nope," he says, clenching his teeth. He hasn't opened his eyes yet, though now they are clenched tight with embarrassment rather than fear.

"Don't worry," you say, "it was built in nineteen-twenty."

His eyes burst open as he gapes at you, shocked. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?" he cries.

"Yes," you say, confused. "It's almost a century old. It wouldn't still be here if it wasn't safe."

Sam laughs humorlessly.

As you climb higher, creaking and rocking but no longer swinging, you enjoy an excellent, uninterrupted view of the boardwalk and, just beyond, the ocean.

The parade is over. From here, you can see the garbage cans like little mountains of wrappers and napkins, cups and colorful beads, empty bottles and barely eaten cotton candy.

You look over at Sam, still gritting his jaw, and wonder if you like him because of him, or if because liking him seems like the right thing to do. You decide that you like him when he looks over at you and smiles, albeit shakily. It is that easy.

And then, he lowers his head to his knees, sighing against the feeling of his flushed cheek against the cool skin of his bare leg.

“Are you okay?” you ask. Your predilection to stiffness has been fading since meeting Sam at the Mermaid Parade, but in the face of this bewildering development, it is beginning to return.

Part of why you admire Sam is his confidence in all things. To make jokes in class. To be able to talk to anyone like they are already his friends. To carry the books of a peculiar girl with a sprained ankle.

“Yes,” he says. You suspect he is lying by how his voice quivers and rasps. “I’ll be fine in a second.” But, as a second passes, and then a minute, his head remains between his knees, his breathing shallow.

You deliberate for a moment, biting your lip. And then, hesitantly, methodically, you reach your hand to his baseball cap and rest it there, stroking his head as your mother once did for you, before your sister died and she went away, too.

It is a bit awkward to rub someone’s head through their hat, but you try to ignore the discomfiture.

Without warning, he shifts his head into your lap in a single, fluid movement. You hold your breath so as not to audibly inhale.

Sam sinks his head into the layers of your skirt. When another drop and swing come in the car's descent, rolling once again from one end of the track to the other, he squeezes himself into you.

You watch waves tease the swimmers on the beach, your hand robotic in its movement against Sam's head. "It's almost over," you whisper.

Sam pushes himself up by elbows hurriedly, pulling his hat off to muss his hair again. When he doesn't put it back on, you smile, but you're not sure why. His face is blooming in pinks. You catch a glimpse of a rollercoaster in the distance in the middle of its ninety-degree climb and feel somewhat relieved, somewhat disappointed.

Sam raises himself slightly, determinedly not looking at you as the car approaches the ground, where people in lines wait, looking impatient and overheated. But the car doesn't stop, instead rolling back into its familiar cycle, in the process of an unforeseen second turn.

Without a word, Sam falls back into your lap, already pressing himself into your lap in anticipation of the coming lurch, swing, and creak.

You're glad that he can't see the wide grin that overwhelms your face and think, maybe, that he's grinning too.

Sam is holding your hand.

Giddiness is fizzing in your stomach like a shaken soda can; the sliver of oval between you has expanded, allowing more of your world to enter into his, settle down and take off its shoes.

His hand, about the same size as yours, is sweaty and warm. Your fingers are interlocked, woven together, which you once read in a silly book is more romantic than mere palm to palm.

You've never held someone's hand before. It feels blissfully illegal.

For the duration of the remaining walk to the Cyclone, you feel like Clara Bow, all black and white and *it*.

"Hey, Sam!" you hear someone yell, and Sam snatches his hand back abruptly, his eyes searching above and beyond your head. You stare up at him, loathing the hurt that you know is apparent in your face.

He half-jogs over to a group of kids you recognize from school. You follow behind him, feeling shy. When you reach them, they're already in the middle of a buoyant conversation. One of Sam's friends, a pretty girl with stick-straight blonde hair and dark eyeliner, notices you and watches you curiously as you stand behind him, listening, waiting for something, anything.

Sam sees her looking behind him and turns around. "Oh," he says.

Oh.

The circles in your Venn diagram snap apart and you're jolted out of his world, just like that.

"I'm starved," one of his friends says. "Let's go get some food."

"See you at school," he says to you, looking over his shoulder as they walk away in a rowdy cluster of inside jokes and casual touches. He'll see you at school, he says. School. A whole summer away.

He doesn't invite you to go with them. *I probably would have said no*, you think. And then, *But I would have said yes, if he'd asked.*

You could still catch up to them. Say something about not having any plans for the rest of the day. No one would make you leave; Sam's friends are all too nice for that, even if they really didn't want you there. Maybe Sam would be happy you were coming. Maybe he didn't invite you because he thought you wouldn't want to come. He has thought that before, you remember.

But you don't.

Stupid.

You spend the rest of the summer at the public pool, sunken in the deep end as leaves and deceased insects litter its hollow cement shell, and practice holding your breath.

THE SIDESHOW TALKER'S AFTERWORD

You try to ignore me – to avert your eyes and look away – to close your ears and your minds to what I have to say – just another gimmick, just another tourist attraction – just another greedy fool –

Now that we've finished – what do you say? Yes, no, maybe so – now that we've finished – you can close the books – click out of the tabs – turn away from the turn of the century – we've finished with this time, that time, and those times, too – there's nothing for us there, now, anyway – well, if you say so –

It's nothing new – that's the trick – the trick that keeps them coming back – summer after summer – but never *after* summer – if it were news to you – it'd be a lot less interesting –

Everything's already there – yes, up there, exactly where you think – ha! If miracles weren't possible – we wouldn't be able to even imagine them – nor dream of them – think about *that* – yes – miracles – I think so – yes –

Show's over, folks – do go home – wherever home may be – by car, train, or aero-plane – it doesn't matter to me – so long as you get home safe – kiss the kids goodnight – then stay up a few more hours – wondering, wishing – what you saw tonight – is it real? On the inside –

Give yourself a moment – to digest – to marinate – to do whatever the kids do these days – remember what they used to say – do you? That's good – I've long since forgotten – no, don't tell me – I'll just forget – again –

It matters – if you want it to – it doesn't – that is, if you don't – the freaks, they can convince themselves of anything – doesn't mean it's not real –

What does it mean? Don't ask me – I'm just the gatekeeper – the captain of the little wooden boat with the oar and the lantern – you can see it, can't you? The lantern – where are my manners – of course you can see it –

You're here, aren't you?

Sometimes you come out of there changed – sometimes so changed so I don't recognize you anymore – sometimes so changed so you don't recognize me anymore – have you been here before? My apologies, I thought I recognized –

Ah, goodbye, my friends – goodbye – freaks go home at the end of the day, too, you know – soon, it'll just be me, here – to bark at the streets till dawn – to talk to the empty till it fills again – it always does –

You're still here? Well – if you insist – I can tell more stories – spin more yarn – I grow weary, too, you know – but no one ever asks – the stories – they may seem different – I've been here long enough – but they're really all the same – the same as you and me and bones –

And the ghosts – whispering in your ear – you hear them, too – I can see it in your eyes – ghost stories told so often they come back to life – even if just for a moment – but, still, just for a moment –

Do come back – if you can – if you must, for I see now you must – do forgive me if I do not remember you – for I get quite caught up, I must admit – yes, well – excuse me – I must be getting back to –

Step right up – with your own eyes –