

YOU BURY ME

William O'Reilly

All cities are haunted for someone, but none were as haunted as his New York.

Nearly every avenue was a gauntlet of phantoms.

Mott Street was especially possessed. From his old apartment on the corner of Houston Street all the way south to Chinatown it was a virtual no-go zone. Each little place a gravestone for what once was and never would be again.

Their first meal together was at Cafe Gitane. They had Moroccan meatballs and French wine and laughed and listened in on the conversations of the off-the-clock models at the tables around them. They grew comfortable with each other, and it was about the happiest he had ever been. In the brief minutes it took him to run to the ATM at the deli around the corner, he decided it was love, or whatever that is to a 26-year-old who sees his reality and dreams meeting for the first time.

He could have been accused of being blinded by first date exuberance, but his eyes were wide open later that week when he walked into Emporio Pizzeria and spotted her at the bar in a blue sundress and white sneakers reading a back issue of *Artforum*. They skipped their dinner reservation and went back to his place. They passed his roommates with barely a word and emerged from the bedroom two hours later. They walked in embrace down to Wo Hop.

The duck was a bad choice, but the fried squid and beer were good and the city swirled around them. They were seated with a group of middle-aged Italian guys from Bay Ridge who busted his balls and accused him of being a cheapskate for taking a girl like her to a place like that. The skinny one who claimed to be an actor asked how long they had been together. He just laughed, but when she said, “Feels like forever,” he knew it would be.

They waited in line outside Parisi Bakery for fresh bread on a Saturday morning. Her hair was tousled and she was wearing one of his sweaters. The hem hung below her hips and she had rolled the sleeves up four times. She looked so small and vulnerable, and in that moment, he vowed to protect her for as long as he lived. Memories like that don’t just go away. Are you expected to forget and carry on like it never happened? Forget the smell of the bread and the feeling that he had never felt before, that this is what real relationships

are like and maybe this is why all those couples look so goddamn happy all the time?

Even trees held her ghost. The locust in front of Gimme Coffee was perfect for leaning against in embrace on an autumn day as the leaves crunched underfoot, whispering for the first time, “I love you”, and hearing whispered back without hesitation, “I love you too”.

No, he didn’t spend a lot of time on Mott Street anymore. Really all of downtown was a problem. There was the night they played Hangman while sitting at the bar in Balthazar, sipping Manhattans, and when he solved her puzzle it read “You are the one.” At that moment, in a room full of the beautiful and the blessed, he knew he was the luckiest. What are you supposed to do with a memory like that?

He tried to bury it down in the same humid cave where he kept that August afternoon when they sat on a bench in the Broadway-Lafayette station waiting for the B train. She had been absentmindedly playing with the plastic ring from her water bottle cap. Then she put it on her left ring finger and leaned her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. They were stuck together by the sweat on her cheek, and even the breeze of the arriving train didn’t cut through the tropical heat down there, but still goosebumps rose on his arms as

he considered asking the question that he did not have the courage for. There's no cave deep enough for a memory like that.

Sometimes drowning is more efficient than burying, but even his sixth whisky at Toad Hall didn't wash away the snowy night they played endless rounds of pool in the back room, and she leaned against the table and cocked her eye and assessed him for a moment before saying, in a weight that made clear she had never spoken these words before, "I want to have children someday, and I want them to be yours." Somehow that happened. There was a moment in this universe when that happened. The room still existed. Yet nothing else did.

Her ghost floated above him as he walked the city streets. At the chosen location—it could be anywhere from the Pak Punjab bodega on 2nd Avenue to the sidewalk carts outside the Strand bookstore—he was immediately immersed in conversations from further back than he'd like to admit.

They lingered under the marquee of Cinemas 1, 2, and 3 on 60th and 3rd in that ephemeral moment after a show, still energized and not wanting to leave the magic of the bright lights just yet.

"What does your future look like?" she asked.

"You," he replied.

“Jesus, that’s cheesy. Seriously, describe it.”

“Realistically? I don’t know.”

“Come on. Just dream future. Best case scenario.”

“Ok. I’m actually good at that,” he said. “This is embarrassing, but— Did I ever tell you what I did to fall asleep at night as a kid?”

She shook her head and failed to mask her excitement at being let in this far, but he trusted her.

“I’d lie there in the dark imagining a super-detailed picture of an alternate life, or some like, idealized future. One of my favorites was creating this whole world where I grew up rich in some California beach town. I was this surfer kid with a big house on the water and an incredible girlfriend. I can picture it all to this day. I had a Jeep Wrangler and a golden retriever and we had bon-fires on the beach at night. I got into Dartmouth.”

“What was her name?” she asked.

“The girlfriend or the golden retriever?”

“It’s not the dog I’m jealous of.”

“I don’t even think I named her,” he said. “Don’t be jealous. I could tell you what she wore and the bands she listened to, but I don’t think she had a name.”

“Have we talked to a professional about this hobby?” she asked.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Sorry, go on.”

“Well, so now I have this fantasy day— I mean, I don’t do it to fall asleep anymore, it’s just daydreaming. But now I have this fantasy where I’m coming home from a long work trip somewhere exotic and I get out of the cab in front of my Brooklyn Heights brownstone and my wife—you, of course—is sitting on the stoop reading a book with a glass of wine waiting for me. I drop my worn leather duffel bags on the landing and we kiss and then she hands me a drink and we sit on the stairs and talk about our kids who are asleep inside and I tell her about my trip and she tells me about her week and— I don’t know. But it’s perfect.”

“You even imagined the luggage?” she asked, laughing.

“I said it was detailed. Don’t mock my dreams.”

“I’m not, I’m not. It’s beautiful.”

She kissed him and then leaned back to look in his eyes, grasping his shoulders.

“I’ll always be there when you come home,” she said.

Later he committed this moment to memory with the confident hope that he would share it one day as an example of her undying loyalty. He saw a room full of their children and dear friends who all smiled knowingly and dabbed at their tears as he recounted just one of the charmed hours that made up their life together.

He knew there is an expiration date when grief becomes obsession, when it crosses the boundary from romantic melancholia to a mental health issue. But he made a home on his island of sorrow. All his things were there. It was where he ate his meals alone and fitfully laid his head at night. And it was an island peopled with his fellow natives—in his books and music and the films he watched, and even passers-by on the sidewalk. Fellow grieverers all around him. Even if he could build a raft to escape his island, did he really want to, knowing it would be the last of her left to lose? He wasn't sure, but he was sure of the exact location of the bench in Central Park where the plaque reads:

*To Meg ~ From Wes
She worked, laughed, loved, cried, and danced in this city.
We fell in love on this island.
She owned my soul from the beginning, before we even met.*

"God, that's beautiful," she said as they stopped to read it on a long New Year's Day walk.

“I know, but it’s so sad,” he said.

“It’s good sad. Like those sappy old couples you see still holding hands as they walk.”

“I want to be like that some day.”

“We will,” she said, “And when I die, promise me you’ll make a plaque like that?” “But I don’t want you to die first,” he said.

“Too bad, I couldn’t bear it.”

“Not fair.”

“There’s a word for it,” she said. “An Arabic word. ‘Ya’aburnee.’ It’s the hope that you’ll die before your lover because life would be too painful without them. The literal translation is something like ‘You bury me.’”

“Well, if you die, I’m burying myself right with you,” he said.

They were half way through their second round of drinks at Fred’s on Amsterdam Avenue and she was still describing her dream funeral. She wanted a mix of Jewish and Viking traditions. Her mourners should sit Shiva for seven days, and afterwards they should feast and drink and procreate. She’d like a cremation pyre, preferably on a rocky beach somewhere far from the city. “Do with the ashes what you’d like,” she said. She was gone and it didn’t matter much to her anymore. He always imagined a large procession at Grace

Church and his ashes spread in Washington Square Park. He hoped she'd wear a veil.

"I don't want a tombstone," she said, "but when you get my bench make sure it says something like 'She crossed over,' or 'She left this realm.' It's not an ending, it's a transition."

Death was just another part of life, she told him. It fascinated her and terrified him. She believed in redevelopment. He believed in preservation.

"It's an ending for the people you leave behind," he said.

"They're still alive. I should be so lucky. They're not my problem anymore."

If he asked her then if she approached breakups the same way she approached death, would he have been better prepared for the loss? *Of course not*, he knew. He would have convinced himself that he could create for her a life from which she would not so easily be willing to cross over. And he would have been wrong.

As he hesitantly walked past Fred's one March night he peered through its darkened windows and there was just enough light inside to see the little nook in the back corner of the bar where they sat that New Year's Day a lifetime ago. There were liquor boxes stacked up and someone had left a week-

old copy of the *Daily News* on top of them. It was hard to imagine the effervescence that once filled that room and followed them everywhere they went. He had felt that they were active members of this massive village of strangers, where every warm light beckoned them in with the promise of new couples and characters to meet.

If he had been in a more generous mood, the wail of a passing ambulance headed uptown would have reminded him of her desires. He was still alive. He should have feasted and drank and procreated. But his specialty was sentimentality, and a bit of self-flagellation, so all he could do was wail "no." No, no, no, no, no! There was nothing more he could have done with their time, he told himself. He had tried and it made no difference, he convinced himself. Love ends and we all die alone, he promised himself.

"They should celebrate what we had together," she had said, "but they can't die with me."

The geography of their love was a map imprinted on his brain. The geography of its demise was harder to pinpoint. He had tried to ignore and dismiss so many of its markings. There was no dramatic battle, just moments that once strung together could only lead to a single conclusion: it was over.

No good came of that night at Fanelli's when Bob Bozic was behind the bar and in a storytelling mood. "Just one more round" became his refrain and her torment until they knew all about Bob's ancestral mansion in Serbia and fighting Larry Holmes at the Garden. She was half way down the block by the time he stopped saying goodbye to the bar and joined her outside. She kept walking and refused to acknowledge him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Seriously?"

"We were having fun."

She stared at him impassively except for the flexing muscles of her jaw and raised her hand to hail a cab.

He had a tendency to slap backs and make friends with everyone in the bar except the people he had come with. She had a tendency to recede when hurt and carefully catalog the crime in the dockets she kept to be prosecuted at later, more opportune dates. Neither had a tendency for healthy communication.

Their silence was finally broken when they got a cab and he banged his head on the doorframe getting in.

"And you're fucking drunk," she said.

“Yes, I’m fucking drunk,” he replied. “We were at a fucking bar.”

Was alcohol the cause of their death? It was both a symptom and an unsuccessful treatment, he decided. First, it was a celebration. “To us,” they toasted. Then it was just what you did in New York when you were young and social, or not that young and not that social. It was just what you did in New York. Later, it was a lubricant for conversation. And when that failed at least it was an activity to fill the voids. Palliative care, really. They barely spoke anymore at the end. He actively had to think of things to say while they walked down the street. A couple silently eating dinner is sad. But a silent couple at a bar could be soulful. With the right lighting and cocktail in front of you, any misery in New York could be soulful. This was the rationalization that had them out four nights a week. They still drank the other three nights, but separately and alone.

Towards the end he planned their evening venues with the hope they would remind them of better times. They had stayed at Milano’s until close one night playing John Prine on the jukebox and dancing to the annoyance of the haggard regulars. Surely that magic could be tapped again. But when they went back, they ended up relying far too much on the bartender to keep their

conversation going. She was a pugnacious Australian and did her best to ridicule them between pouring drinks, but shared mockery is not the elixir of love, so they mostly chatted about work. As they sat together in loneliness, he had wondered how this narrow bar that at times felt like the last outpost of the real Bowery could have ever been the stage upon which they plotted their beautiful future together. “Angel From Montgomery” could only be given so much credit. All the same, it had become a bookend on their love, one more marker to avoid on his ever-constricted walks.

His misery was a sickness he no longer disclosed. In the beginning, his friends abided by his detours to avoid his landmarks. But their sympathy ran its course. They no longer cared that he had met her parents for the first time at French Roast, and that afterwards her parents told her they were crazy about him and wanted her to bring him home for Thanksgiving. That was a long time ago, his friends complained, it’s a Mexican place now with decent margaritas and anyway it’s really hard to get a table for six outside in the West Village on a Saturday afternoon, so that’s where they were going and he could meet them there if he wanted, but they weren’t switching the reservation.

Even when his friends were in the mood to give advice, he did not want to hear it. Of course, he knew he should remember the bad times when he was

miserable, when love was slipping through his hands and his desperate overtures only hastened her drifting away. Still, when he happened past Lucky Strike, he could only remember the way she would lean back in her chair at brunch and put her feet up on his legs while she read the Sunday *Times*, her scuffed loafer dangling off one big toe. Why couldn't he wallow instead in the long walk after their final brunch, when she led him down to Battery Park, snaking through the empty streets of sterile new apartment buildings? He felt like a man being walked by his assassin to his own hit, so maze-like and pointless her route, and yet so laser-focused her attention to it. Was she trying to confuse him, he asked himself? Was she trying to throw off his sense of direction so he would never be able to return to the scene of the crime?

As if he would forget that they were sitting under the blue lights in that little cove on the Hudson River and that, while he felt her plunge the knife and knew instantly that a part of him was gone now and never would be recovered, he couldn't take his eyes off her sweater. His sweater, to be precise. She borrowed it one Saturday morning and never gave it back. It had been his favorite, a big shaggy dog with sentimental value even before she imbued herself in it. While she went on explaining why they didn't work, so carefully searching for her words and hopscotching between vague explanations so that

she never actually finished a sentence, he kept staring down at that sweater, avoiding eye contact and the tears behind them. He busied his mind on what he would say when she offered it back to him. Maybe one day he would wear it again. In the meantime, while it still held her smell, he would try to fit it in the box where he kept her letters and little mementos of their love—movie ticket stubs, champagne corks, the Post-it notes she plastered around his apartment when she was trying to teach him Italian, birthday candles, the Balthazar napkin upon which they played Hangman, her water bottle engagement ring.

She didn't give back the sweater. For her, his ownership of their places and things ended with them. Her walks were much simpler. Her city was much larger.

He tried so hard. He did not text, he did not call, he did not stalk her social media, he did not knock on her door, he did not utter her name. He made it two months. The first snow of winter broke him. It snuck in overnight, and when he woke up, the city was blanketed with an angelic shroud that softened the noise and flattened the light.

He left his apartment early to make sure he saw the white city before it turned gray. He wanted to experience it all. He had learned quickly in his time in New York that each season has a neighborhood. Spring is the Upper West

Side. The white blossoms in the trees of Central Park appear just before the first warm day of the year. Soon, the tulips are rising in the gardens stretching down the Broadway median and the sidewalk cafes are filled with sunglassed-diners who shiver when the afternoon chill returns. Summer is Harlem. The city is at its sexiest and it shirks off its clothes in the sweaty heat. The buzz of air conditioners overhead mix with the hum of an urban existence still lived on the glinting streets. Mango ices from the sidewalk carts and BBQs on the East River. Gentrifiers and old-timers alike, drawn to the singular perfection of a stoop on a summer evening. Fall is the West Village. Brownstone-lined side streets lit aglow by orange leaves and filled with fresh-faced couples draped in tweed and wool. The first fires of the season spiral from chimneys and saturate the air with the nostalgic smell of home. But winter is for all of New York. It is a blank slate when even a dusting of snow can sand down the edges and leave every commercialized and garish and neglected street looking like an Arcadia dreamed up by a young suburban boy.

He began his walk in TriBeCa. Wind tunnels assaulted him at every corner as he worked his way up Hudson Street. He cut over to West Broadway when he hit the Holland Tunnel entrance and lowered his brow against the snow and averted his gaze as he passed Lucky Strike and Toad Hall, rounding the

block to Grand Street. Then he was in the shelter of SoHo. The hollow echo of heels on the cobblestones was gone and all he heard was the faint whistling of the wind passing through the fire escapes above him. He left this Eden on Houston Street and he was immediately worried that he began his walk too late. The road was clear except for the berms of slush piled up against the sidewalks. The snow had already melted off the awnings of the south-facing shops across the way. But he had faith in the storm, so he crossed the street and entered Greenwich Village where the sun had not yet penetrated. Thompson Street was the natural choice. The canopy of trees funneled him past laundries and Italian restaurants and chess shops until Washington Square Park was revealed before him. Children and dogs tumbled through the snow while their parents stamped their feet against the cold and warmed their hands with very large cups of coffee. NYU students tried to mask their excitement, but still giggled while smoking and tossing snowballs at friends.

He took two slow laps around the fountain before emerging through the arch where the grandeur of lower 5th Avenue rolled out to the horizon. The snow was falling faster and the wind blew it sideways, almost obscuring the pinnacle of the Empire State Building far in the distance. He quickened his pace and strolled up 5th, feeling as he always did on that street, like an extra in

the greatest production ever put on. He avoided eye contact with the lead actors and admired the set construction as he went. The avenue opened as he plodded north and he felt more exposed to the elements. The wet street seeped through his shoes. His mood was faltering. He turned to look back at the Flatiron Building and imagined a kinship with the carriage drivers in Edward Steichen's classic photograph. Dark silhouettes in the shadows of an overexposed city. He needed a warm destination to keep him going.

The Met. He could make it to the museum. It was still almost 60 blocks away, but it was good to be out and moving. He was barely thinking about her, he thought. At 41st Street he stopped to check in on the lions guarding the entrance of the Public Library. They were named Patience and Fortitude. It was one of his favorite pieces of trivia. Seeing the statues, then covered with snow from mane to tail, their names struck him as cruel. What else could marble lions be but patient and strong? They were given no other options. He wiped some snow off Fortitude's paws and continued on. He could almost see Central Park in the distance.

First, a quick detour. Souring mood or not, there are only so many chances to see a white Christmas under the Rockefeller Center tree. He swore it was one of the few things that did not shrink with age. The tree and the art deco

skyscraper behind it were limitless in his child's eye and never lost an inch no matter how cynical he got about his adopted hometown. He was still thinking about family day trips into the city as a kid when he hit 59th Street. They couldn't afford anything inside the Plaza, so his father sold them that a hotdog eaten on the steps of the fountain across the street was a more authentic experience. Sitting there one summer day, they watched a man awkwardly rollerblading with a much younger woman. As the man got closer his father started laughing and his mother averted her gaze and whispered

"Oh, god no." His sister, a few years older, realized before him what his parents saw. The man was their neighbor back in New Jersey. The woman was not his wife. The neighbor kissed her deeply and pulled their lycra-clad bodies together. His sister was outraged in her innocence and demanded they confront him. He was confused but understood that he had seen a *bad* thing and people would be *sad*. Eventually his father bribed them away with a carriage ride in the park where he explained that not all adults are perfect. He was forever then a little embittered that his philandering neighbor had managed on that day to ensure he would never again look at the Plaza and rollerblades and marriage the same way. He entered Central Park and wound his way up to the

Mall. All of New York was there. He wondered how many of them were philanthropists too. It was harder to tell with everyone all bundled up and without their rollerblades. He made a game of it, and by the time he reached Bethesda Fountain, he had counted 47 probable trysts. He wished he had time to cheer himself up with a carriage ride.

The docent at the Met ticket desk wrapped herself with her cardigan in worry and told him he barely made it. They would be closing in an hour. He did not need much time. There was only one exhibit he wanted to see. He strode through the Egyptian wing, passing from the Paleolithic to Roman periods with barely a look. He came through the doorway and stood before the placid water surrounding the Temple of Dendur. He had timed it just right. The afternoon sky darkened to a cool winter blue in the great grid of windows, and the sandstone walls were bathed in Nubian amber light. A temple dedicated to the goddess of immortal love and her husband she brought back from the dead. They outmaneuvered the fates and were rewarded with a brownstone with a view of the park. *What was more New York?*, he joked to himself.

It was the type of cheesy joke he would have liked to tell her to elicit a groan and a pity laugh. Maybe he, too, could revive the past. He asked himself

what was the worst that could happen. He called her. On his second try, she answered.

“Did something happen?” she asked.

“No. I, uh, I was just thinking about you. I’m at the Met in the Temple of Dendur and it reminded me of you.” He wanted to say it reminded him of “us” but he knew he would not get the word out before his voice cracked.

“We never went there,” she said.

“I know, but I always wanted to take you.”

“You always talked about it, but we never went there.”

“We still could,” he said. “Just to see.”

“See what?”

“If we can make it work. At least try.” “Let’s not do this,” she said.

“Why?” he asked.

“We were miserable all the time. Do you want to go back to that?”

Somehow, despite the fact that it was she who had broken up with him, it wasn’t until that moment that he considered she had also been miserable. He was absorbed by immense shame of failure.

“Was there something I wasn’t doing?” he asked. “Is there someone else?”

“There wasn’t then, but there is now,” she said. “But that’s not the point. I was lonely. I was always just lonely.”

“That’s not true,” he said. “I love you. You’re all I think about.”

“Well, that’s what I was thinking about, if you cared.”

She kept talking and he responded at all the right moments, but he found himself intensely focused on his steps as he paced across the stone floor. He methodically stepped from one rectangle to the next, and to the next, and to the next, never landing on a crack, never placing two steps inside the same stone. He intuitively knew he had to abide by those simple rules. In this way, he crossed from the windows to the temple, back and forth, back and forth.

“You imagine I’ve been sitting there waiting for you all along,” she said. “You’re just looking to match some fantasy you came up with while you were trying to fall asleep as a kid.”

His fantasy of her lived in a dream of a life in New York that he began conjuring long before they met. They had briefly come close, but reality never quite matched up. Sometimes he wondered whether her version of their history was as enchanted as his.

At that moment, he had no idea where she was sitting. He heard she had moved. He could not handle learning more details. Lacking anything tangible,

he spoke instead to the warm light in a high window in one of the buildings across 5th Avenue. Countless warm lights were now filling the dark sky above the tree line. He found her among them. She was still up there with the living, looking down on him in his temple. He stopped avoiding the cracks and took a seat on a ledge between some tourist families. He had been walking for so long.

“Just come down and meet me,” he said. “We’ll finally see the Temple.”

“What are you—“

He cut her off.

“Just come down. We’ll go for a walk. It’s beautiful out. We can wander through the park. Did we ever go to the Sheep Meadow at night? It’s incredible. The whole skyline rises up in front of you like some giant tidal wave and it looks like it’s going to roll right over you but it doesn’t and— Oh! Maybe we can go to the zoo. I don’t know when they close, but it’s still early. We can see the depressed polar bears finally play in the snow and then we can go laugh at the little penguins. It’s still so early.”

If he just kept talking fast enough, he could outrun the silence on her end of the phone.

“Afterwards, let's cut across the park and go to Fiorello's. We'll sit at the bar and have ice-cold champagne and oysters. It's a perfect night for oysters. Then we can go see something artsy at Lincoln Plaza.”

“That theatre closed,” she said. “That's the least of it, but it's closed.”

“I know,” he said. “I just meant—”

“I'm sorry, I need to go,” she said. “Just...be well.”

He walked out of the museum certain that the other patrons could see the pain that was simmering up. He was feeling self-conscious. Of course, he would soon learn that feeling self-conscious meant the real pain hadn't arrived yet. The clock on that had already started, but he had a few moments left to get his bearings. And yet...*There wasn't then, but there is now.* He would torture himself investigating that revelation later. He lingered at the top of the stairs outside the entrance. The snow had stopped while he was inside the museum and the temperature dropped. He turned up his collar and shoved his hands in his pockets. If anyone was paying attention to him, he hoped they saw a man bracing himself for the cold night. In reality, he was sure any movement would crack his brittle defenses and the tears would come. He finally broke his trance and started moving, his head down, his eyes on the ground. He couldn't see any farther ahead of him than his feet, but like driving through a dark night

with nothing visible beyond the headlights, he thought he could make it home that way. The time for his resolve soon ran out and the tears came freely. He lumbered down 5th, bumping into passers-by and wiping away his cheeks as he mumbled apologies. By the time he hit Central Park South, he stopped caring who noticed him. Hundreds of New Yorkers streaming past, broken souls no doubt among them. Thirteen avenues stretched in front of him. A linear city that had never let him down before. Each route would get him home eventually. But he did not know which way to go. Which course had their love not touched? Which would break his heart the least? He stood waiting, but the answer did not come.

§

Years later now and her ghost was still his most constant companion. His map of the city shrunk day by day. He did all he could to avoid her and her memory, still so present when he passed one of their love's gravestones. He wanted the anonymity of urban life, but the end of the relationship taught him that every New Yorker creates for themselves their own small town, and in that archipelago of 8 million villages they all must live with the fear that the one who broke their heart could be in every room they enter. Some days he hoped he'd bump into her in his village. Most days he dreaded it, convinced he'd be alone

and she would not. But, like an addict in recovery, he'd test himself when he was feeling confident.

It was that boldness that took him down Mott Street on a gray April day long before spring had come. He looked through the door of his old building on the corner of Houston Street. The entranceway had been refurbished and there were strange residents he could not recognize lined up waiting for the elevator that never worked when he lived there. He could not listen in on the conversations of off-the-clock models at Cafe Gitane or find expectant girls reading old *Artforums* at the bar at Emporio. The shutters were down. There was no smell of warm bread wafting out open doors at Parisi Bakery. At Gimme Coffee he leaned against the locust tree out front and read a hand-scrawled sign taped to the darkened door.

"Thank you for the memories," its former owners had written.

He felt the illicit allure of a dream he wasn't sure he wanted to come true. Intrusive thoughts bombarded him but he did not push them away. He walked farther, each block bringing nothing but emptiness. All gone, he thought, they're all gone. Was this what it took for his graveyard to turn back into an unmarred meadow? It was a dirty feeling, disgusting really. He knew it but he felt it nonetheless.

“This goddamn city is free,” he said to the empty street.

A growing sense of vindication pushed him on. He'd put so much faith in the city. He'd entrusted it with his dreams and it had cradled them. It gave him a livelihood, friends who understood him like he had never been understood before, the camaraderie of strangers, the rare knowledge that ambition was all he needed to make it, the energy of living in the absolute center of all that was aspirational. It gave him a true home at last. And then it broke his heart. But even that wasn't enough. No, it wouldn't leave him alone. It taunted his misery and mocked the raw-souled innocence he once had. He'd broken the cardinal rule: he'd stopped moving at the intersection and looked up as his love floated away. New York kept hustling right past him. It jostled his shoulders and called him an asshole and told him to go back home. He *was* home, he wanted to yell. “Just give me a minute, please!”

“*Fuck you,*” replied New York.

Well fuck you, too, he thought. Look at you. Who's moving now? He walked past Balthazar, shades drawn and empty. Looks like the power breakfasts were canceled, he laughed. No more plats pour deux for any of us. Over to Milano's where a man should be able to drown his sorrows in peace. But no, memory had to sidle up and plop its fat ass in the next stool over and ask

why the long face. Well, it's closing time now. The last-call bell rang a long time ago.

He was ebullient. His minefield of memories had been cleared. He could go where he pleased. Every restaurant, every bar, every museum, every theatre slammed shut, his demons padlocked inside. The whole city was a blank slate. The whole world, really. Burn some sage and start again. May we all have learned our lesson, he thought. New York isn't for the openhearted.

His victory parade wound its way through SoHo and he found himself at last at Lucky Strike. The sun broke through the clouds and illuminated the ashen city enough for him to see through the window. A blank slate inside too. The bistro tables had been taken away; the zinc-topped bar collected dust. The distressed mirrors still held the day's menu drawn in the meticulously carefree handwriting of a staffer long-gone, but there were no other traces of what the room once was and the memories it held. In a fit of nostalgia, he pulled down his mask to blow on the window and began to draw their initials in the fog before correcting himself and wiping it clean. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in a mirror by the bar. His jaw was tight and his eyes offered no trace of empathy. It was a callous face and he felt exposed, all the more so because it was the first naked one he had seen in weeks. He was ashamed. He opened his

padlocks and allowed a farewell. Sunday afternoons that never end, eggs done just right, the Metro section read first, black coffee and Bloody Marys, the creak of a chair as legs are stretched out and a scuffed loafer hangs perfectly, precariously, off one big toe.

He remembered a maudlin epigram he once read: “One day your parents put you down and never picked you up again.” It had struck him as treachery when he first saw it, and mostly made him think about the mechanics of parenting. But now he looked for the arms that had stopped reaching for him. Loss is rarely noticed in the moment, he thought. Only much later is it realized that *that* moment, or *that one*, or *that one*, was in fact an ending. When was the last time he heard her summon him by his pet name—Booms—in her lilting and questioning tone that was always followed by a tenderly innocent query, like what they should name their theoretical future dog? What did her eyes look like the last time they ever had sex? Did she give any hint the last time she ever laughed at one of his jokes? Did she hold back, just a bit, knowing it wasn’t sincere? Did he tell her he loved her the last night they ever fell asleep together? Did they hold each other close, or did they roll in opposite directions, staring at opposite walls? One day she held his hand and then put it down and never reached for it again. Loss is rarely noticed in the moment.

He sat under the blue lights on the Hudson and looked across the quiet harbor to the country beyond it. He could wash himself clean in the waters and leave this island behind forever. He could begin anew somewhere else where he had no memories, no ghosts hidden around every corner. But then what? To what end? Pain would find him there too, and it wouldn't do it with nearly as much style. There was no other option, he realized. There had never been another option.

He turned around and walked back into his hibernating city. He would wait for it to reawaken.

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