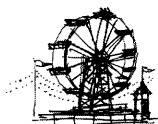


The Third Person Eddie Meets in Heaven



A SUDDEN WIND LIFTED EDDIE, AND HE spun like a pocket watch on the end of a chain. An explosion of smoke engulfed him, swallowing his body in a flume of colors. The sky seemed to pull in, until he could feel it touching his skin like a gathered blanket. Then it shot away and exploded into jade. Stars appeared, millions of stars, like salt sprinkled across the greenish firmament.

Eddie blinked. He was in the mountains now, but the most remarkable mountains, a range that went on forever, with snow-capped peaks, jagged rocks, and sheer purple slopes. In a flat between two crests was a large, black lake. A moon reflected brightly in its water.

Down the ridge, Eddie noticed a flickering of colored light that changed rhythmically, every few seconds. He

stepped in that direction—and realized he was ankle-deep in snow. He lifted his foot and shook it hard. The flakes fell loose, glistening with a golden sheen. When he touched them, they were neither cold nor wet.

Where am I now? Eddie thought. Once again, he took stock of his body, pressing on his shoulders, his chest, his stomach. His arm muscles remained tight, but his midsection was looser, flabbier. He hesitated, then squeezed his left knee. It throbbed in pain and Eddie winced. He had hoped upon leaving the Captain that the wound would disappear. Instead, it seemed he was becoming the man he'd been on earth, scars and fat and all. Why would heaven make you relive your own decay?

He followed the flickering lights down the narrow ridge. This landscape, stark and silent, was breathtaking, more like how he'd imagined heaven. He wondered, for a moment, if he had somehow finished, if the Captain had been wrong, if there were no more people to meet. He came through the snow around a rock ledge to the large clearing from which the lights originated. He blinked again—this time in disbelief.

There, in the snowy field, sitting by itself, was a boxcar-shaped building with a stainless steel exterior and a red barrel roof. A sign above it blinked the word: "EAT."

A diner.

Eddie had spent many hours in places like this. They all looked the same—high-backed booths, shiny countertops, a

row of small-paned windows across the front, which, from the outside, made customers appear like riders in a railroad car. Eddie could make out figures through those windows now, people talking and gesturing. He walked up the snowy steps to the double-paned door. He peered inside.

An elderly couple was sitting to his right, eating pie; they took no notice of him. Other customers sat in swivel chairs at the marble counter or inside booths with their coats on hooks. They appeared to be from different decades: Eddie saw a woman with a 1930s high-collared dress and a long-haired young man with a 1960s peace sign tattooed on his arm. Many of the patrons appeared to have been wounded. A black man in a work shirt was missing an arm. A teenage girl had a deep gash across her face. None of them looked over when Eddie rapped on the window. He saw cooks wearing white paper hats, and plates of steaming food on the counter awaiting serving—food in the most succulent colors: deep red sauces, yellow butter creams. His eyes moved along to the last booth in the right-hand corner. He froze.

What he saw, he could not have seen.

☞“NO,” HE HEARD himself whisper. He turned back from the door. He drew deep breaths. His heart pounded. He spun around and looked again, then banged wildly on the windowpanes.

“No!” Eddie yelled. “No! No!” He banged until he was sure the glass would break. “No!” He kept yelling until the

word he wanted, a word he hadn't spoken in decades, finally formed in his throat. He screamed that word then—he screamed it so loudly that his head throbbed. But the figure inside the booth remained hunched over, oblivious, one hand resting on the table, the other holding a cigar, never looking up, no matter how many times Eddie howled it, over and over again:

“Dad! Dad! Dad!”

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

In the dim and sterile hallway of the V.A. hospital, Eddie's mother opens the white bakery box and rearranges the candles on the cake, making them even, 12 on one side, 12 on the other. The rest of them—Eddie's father, Joe, Marguerite, Mickey Shea—stand around her, watching.

"Does anyone have a match?" she whispers.

They pat their pockets. Mickey fishes a pack from his jacket, dropping two loose cigarettes on the floor. Eddie's mother lights the candles. An elevator pings down the hall. A gurney emerges.

"All right then, let's go," she says.

The small flames wiggle as they move together. The group enters Eddie's room singing softly. "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to—"

The soldier in the next bed wakes up yelling, "WHAT THE HELL?" He realizes where he is and drops back down, embarrassed. The song, once interrupted, seems too heavy to lift again, and only Eddie's mother's voice, shaking in its solitude, is able to continue.

"Happy birthday dear Ed-die . . ." then quickly, "happy birthday to you."

Eddie props himself against a pillow. His burns are bandaged. His leg is in a long cast. There is a pair of crutches by the bed. He looks at these faces and he is consumed by a desire to run away.

Joe clears his throat. "Well, hey, you look pretty good," he says. The others quickly agree. Good. Yes. Very good.

"Your mom got a cake," Marguerite whispers.

Eddie's mother steps forward, as if it's her turn. She presents the cardboard box.

Eddie mumbles, "Thanks, Ma."

She looks around. "Now where should we put this?"

Mickey grabs a chair. Joe clears a small tabletop. Marguerite moves Eddie's crutches. Only his father does not shuffle for the sake of shuffling. He stands against the back wall, a jacket over his arm, staring at Eddie's leg, encased in plaster from thigh to ankle.

Eddie catches his eye. His father looks down and runs his hand over the windowsill. Eddie tightens every muscle in his body and attempts, by sheer will, to force the tears back into their ducts.



☺ALL PARENTS DAMAGE their children. It cannot be helped. Youth, like pristine glass, absorbs the prints of its handlers. Some parents smudge, others crack, a few shatter childhoods completely into jagged little pieces, beyond repair.

The damage done by Eddie's father was, at the beginning, the damage of neglect. As an infant, Eddie was rarely held by the man, and as a child, he was mostly grabbed by the arm, less with love than with annoyance. Eddie's mother handed out the tenderness; his father was there for the discipline.

On Saturdays, Eddie's father took him to the pier. Eddie would leave the apartment with visions of carousels and globs of cotton candy, but after an hour or so, his father would find a familiar face and say, "Watch the kid for me, will ya?" Until his father returned, usually late in the afternoon, often drunk, Eddie stayed in the custody of an acrobat or an animal trainer.

Still, for countless hours of his boardwalk youth, Eddie waited for his father's attention, sitting on railings or squatting in his short pants atop tool chests in the repair shop. Often he'd say, "I can help, I can help!" but the only job entrusted him was crawling beneath the Ferris wheel in

the morning, before the park opened, to collect the coins that had fallen from customers' pockets the night before.

At least four evenings a week, his father played cards. The table had money, bottles, cigarettes, and rules. Eddie's rule was simple: Do not disturb. Once he tried to stand next to his father and look at his cards, but the old man put down his cigar and erupted like thunder, smacking Eddie's face with the back of his hand. "Stop breathing on me," he said. Eddie burst into tears and his mother pulled him to her waist, glaring at her husband. Eddie never got that close again.

Other nights, when the cards went bad and the bottles had been emptied and his mother was already asleep, his father brought his thunder into Eddie and Joe's bedroom. He raked through the meager toys, hurling them against the wall. Then he made his sons lie facedown on the mattress while he pulled off his belt and lashed their rear ends, screaming that they were wasting his money on junk. Eddie used to pray for his mother to wake up, but even the times she did, his father warned her to "stay out of it." Seeing her in the hallway, clutching her robe, as helpless as he was, made it all even worse.

The hands on Eddie's childhood glass then were hard and calloused and red with anger, and he went through his younger years whacked, lashed, and beaten. This was the second damage done, the one after neglect. The damage

of violence. It got so that Eddie could tell by the thump of the footsteps coming down the hall how hard he was going to get it.

Through it all, despite it all, Eddie privately adored his old man, because sons will adore their fathers through even the worst behavior. It is how they learn devotion. Before he can devote himself to God or a woman, a boy will devote himself to his father, even foolishly, even beyond explanation.

AND ON OCCASION, as if to feed the weakest embers of a fire, Eddie's father let a wrinkle of pride crack the veneer of his disinterest. At the baseball field by the 14th Avenue schoolyard, his father stood behind the fence, watching Eddie play. If Eddie smacked the ball to the outfield, his father nodded, and when he did, Eddie leaped around the bases. Other times, when Eddie came home from an alley fight, his father would notice his scraped knuckles or split lip. He would ask, "What happened to the other guy?" and Eddie would say he got him good. This, too, met with his father's approval. When Eddie attacked the kids who were bothering his brother—"the hoodlums," his mother called them—Joe was ashamed and hid in his room, but Eddie's father said, "Never mind him. You're the strong one. Be your brother's keeper. Don't let nobody touch him."

When Eddie started junior high, he mimicked his father's summer schedule, rising before the sun, working at

the park until nightfall. At first, he ran the simpler rides, maneuvering the brake levers, bringing train cars to a gentle stop. In later years, he worked in the repair shop. Eddie's father would test him with maintenance problems. He'd hand him a broken steering wheel and say, "Fix it." He'd point out a tangled chain and say, "Fix it." He'd carry over a rusty fender and some sandpaper and say, "Fix it." And every time, upon completion of the task, Eddie would walk the item back to his father and say, "It's fixed."

At night they would gather at the dinner table, his mother plump and sweating, cooking by the stove, his brother, Joe, talking away, his hair and skin smelling from seawater. Joe had become a good swimmer, and his summer work was at the Ruby Pier pool. Joe talked about all the people he saw there, their swimsuits, their money. Eddie's father was not impressed. Once Eddie overheard him talking to his mother about Joe. "That one," he said, "ain't tough enough for anything but water."

Still, Eddie envied the way his brother looked in the evenings, so tanned and clean. Eddie's fingernails, like his father's, were stained with grease, and at the dinner table Eddie would flick them with his thumbnail, trying to get the dirt out. He caught his father watching him once and the old man grinned.

"Shows you did a hard day's work," he said, and he held up his own dirty fingernails, before wrapping them around a glass of beer.

By this point—already a strapping teenager—Eddie only nodded back. Unbeknownst to him, he had begun the ritual of semaphore with his father, forsaking words or physical affection. It was all to be done internally. You were just supposed to know it, that’s all. Denial of affection. The damage done.

AND THEN, ONE night, the speaking stopped altogether. This was after the war, when Eddie had been released from the hospital and the cast had been removed from his leg and he had moved back into the family apartment on Beachwood Avenue. His father had been drinking at the nearby pub and he came home late to find Eddie asleep on the couch. The darkness of combat had left Eddie changed. He stayed indoors. He rarely spoke, even to Marguerite. He spent hours staring out the kitchen window, watching the carousel ride, rubbing his bad knee. His mother whispered that he “just needed time,” but his father grew more agitated each day. He didn’t understand depression. To him it was weakness.

“Get up,” he yelled now, his words slurring, “and get a job.”

Eddie stirred. His father yelled again.

“Get up . . . and get a job!”

The old man was wobbling, but he came toward Eddie and pushed him. “Get up and get a job! Get up and get a job! Get up . . . and . . . *GET A JOB!*”

Eddie rose to his elbows.

"Get up and get a job! Get up and—"

"ENOUGH!" Eddie yelled, surging to his feet, ignoring the burst of pain in his knee. He glared at his father, his face just inches away. He could smell the bad breath of alcohol and cigarettes.

The old man glanced at Eddie's leg. His voice lowered to a growl. "See? You . . . ain't . . . so . . . hurt."

He reeled back to throw a punch, but Eddie moved on instinct and grabbed his father's arm mid-swing. The old man's eyes widened. This was the first time Eddie had ever defended himself, the first time he had ever done anything besides receive a beating as if he deserved it. His father looked at his own clenched fist, short of its mark, and his nostrils flared and his teeth gritted and he staggered backward and yanked his arm free. He stared at Eddie with the eyes of a man watching a train pull away.

He never spoke to his son again.

This was the final handprint on Eddie's glass. Silence. It haunted their remaining years. His father was silent when Eddie moved into his own apartment, silent when Eddie took a cab-driving job, silent at Eddie's wedding, silent when Eddie came to visit his mother. She begged and wept and beseeched her husband to change his mind, to let it go, but Eddie's father would only say to her, through a clenched jaw, what he said to others who made the same request: "That boy raised a hand to me." And that was the end of the conversation.

All parents damage their children. This was their life together. Neglect. Violence. Silence. And now, someplace beyond death, Eddie slumped against a stainless steel wall and dropped into a snowbank, stung again by the denial of a man whose love, almost inexplicably, he still coveted, a man ignoring him, even in heaven. His father. The damage done.

☉“DON'T BE ANGRY,” a woman's voice said. “He can't hear you.”

Eddie jerked his head up. An old woman stood before him in the snow. Her face was gaunt, with sagging cheeks, rose-colored lipstick, and tightly pulled-back white hair, thin enough in parts to reveal the pink scalp beneath it. She wore wire-rimmed spectacles over narrow blue eyes.

Eddie could not recall her. Her clothes were before his time, a dress made of silk and chiffon, with a bib-like bodice stitched with white beads and topped with a velvet bow just below her neck. Her skirt had a rhinestone buckle and there were snaps and hooks up the side. She stood with elegant posture, holding a parasol with both hands. Eddie guessed she'd been rich.

“Not always rich,” she said, grinning as if she'd heard him. “I was raised much like you were, in the back end of the city, forced to leave school when I was fourteen. I was a working girl. So were my sisters. We gave every nickel back to the family—”

Eddie interrupted. He didn't want another story. "Why can't my father hear me?" he demanded.

She smiled. "Because his spirit—safe and sound—is part of my eternity. But he is not really here. You are."

"Why does my father have to be safe for *you*?"

She paused.

"Come," she said.

☺☺SUDDENLY THEY WERE at the bottom of the mountain. The light from the diner was now just a speck, like a star that had fallen into a crevice.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" the old woman said. Eddie followed her eyes. There was something about her, as if he'd seen her photograph somewhere.

"Are you . . . my third person?"

"I am at that," she said.

Eddie rubbed his head. *Who was this woman?* At least with the Blue Man, at least with the Captain, he had some recollection of their place in his life. Why a stranger? Why now? Eddie had once hoped death would mean a reunion with those who went before him. He had attended so many funerals, polishing his black dress shoes, finding his hat, standing in a cemetery with the same despairing question: *Why are they gone and I'm still here?* His mother. His brother. His aunts and uncles. His buddy Noel. Marguerite. "One day," the priest would say, "we will all be together in the Kingdom of Heaven."

Where were they, then, if this was heaven? Eddie studied this strange older woman. He felt more alone than ever.

“Can I see Earth?” he whispered.

She shook her head no.

“Can I talk to God?”

“You can always do that.”

He hesitated before asking the next question.

“Can I go back?”

She squinted. “Back?”

“Yeah, back,” Eddie said. “To my life. To that last day. Is there something I can do? Can I promise to be good? Can I promise to go to church all the time? Something?”

“Why?” She seemed amused.

“Why?” Eddie repeated. He swiped at the snow that had no cold, with the bare hand that felt no moisture. “Why? Because this place don’t make no sense to me. Because I don’t feel like no angel, if that’s what I’m supposed to feel like. Because I don’t feel like I got it all figured out. I can’t even remember my own death. I can’t remember the accident. All I remember are these two little hands—this little girl I was trying to save, see? I was pulling her out of the way and I must’ve grabbed her hands and that’s when I . . .”

He shrugged.

“Died?” the old woman said, smiling. “Passed away? Moved on? Met your Maker?”

“Died,” he said, exhaling. “And that’s all I remember.

Then you, the others, all this. Ain't you supposed to have peace when you die?"

"You have peace," the old woman said, "when you make it with yourself."

"Nah," Eddie said, shaking his head. "Nah, you don't." He thought about telling her the agitation he'd felt every day since the war, the bad dreams, the inability to get excited about much of anything, the times he went to the docks alone and watched the fish pulled in by the wide rope nets, embarrassed because he saw himself in those helpless, flopping creatures, snared and beyond escape.

He didn't tell her that. Instead he said, "No offense, lady, but I don't even know you."

"But I know you," she said.

Eddie sighed.

"Oh yeah? How's that?"

"Well," she said, "if you have a moment."

☺SHE SAT DOWN then, although there was nothing to sit on. She simply rested on the air and crossed her legs, lady-like, keeping her spine straight. The long skirt folded neatly around her. A breeze blew, and Eddie caught the faint scent of perfume.

"As I mentioned, I was once a working girl. My job was serving food in a place called the Seahorse Grille. It was near the ocean where you grew up. Perhaps you remember it?"

She nodded toward the diner, and it all came back to Eddie. Of course. That place. He used to eat breakfast there. A greasy spoon, they called it. They'd torn it down years ago.

"You?" Eddie said, almost laughing. "You were a waitress at the Seahorse?"

"Indeed," she said, proudly. "I served dockworkers their coffee and longshoremen their crab cakes and bacon.

"I was an attractive girl in those years, I might add. I turned away many a proposal. My sisters would scold me. 'Who are you to be so choosy?' they would say. 'Find a man before it's too late.'

"Then one morning, the finest-looking gentleman I had ever seen walked through the door. He wore a chalk-stripe suit and a derby hat. His dark hair was neatly cut and his mustache covered a constant smile. He nodded when I served him and I tried not to stare. But when he spoke with his colleague, I could hear his heavy, confident laughter. Twice I caught him looking in my direction. When he paid his bill, he said his name was Emile and he asked if he might call on me. And I knew, right then, my sisters would no longer have to hound me for a decision.

"Our courtship was exhilarating, for Emile was a man of means. He took me places I had never been, bought me clothes I had never imagined, paid for meals I had never experienced in my poor, sheltered life. Emile had earned his wealth quickly, from investments in lumber and steel. He was

a spender, a risk taker—he went over the boards when he got an idea. I suppose that is why he was drawn to a poor girl like me. He abhorred those who were born into wealth, and rather enjoyed doing things the ‘sophisticated people’ would never do.

“One of those things was visiting seaside resorts. He loved the attractions, the salty food, the gypsies and fortune-tellers and weight guessers and diving girls. And we both loved the sea. One day, as we sat in the sand, the tide rolling gently to our feet, he asked for my hand in marriage.

“I was overjoyed. I told him yes and we heard the sounds of children playing in the ocean. Emile went over the boards again and swore that soon he would build a resort park just for me, to capture the happiness of this moment—to stay eternally young.”

The old woman smiled. “Emile kept his promise. A few years later, he made a deal with the railroad company, which was looking for a way to increase its riders on the weekend. That’s how most amusement parks were built, you know.”

Eddie nodded. He knew. Most people didn’t. They thought amusement parks were constructed by elves, built with candy canes. In fact, they were simply business opportunities for railroad companies, who erected them at the final stops of routes, so commuters would have a reason to ride on weekends. *You know where I work?* Eddie used to say. *The end of the line. That’s where I work.*

“Emile,” the old woman continued, “built the most wonderful place, a massive pier using timber and steel he already owned. Then came the magical attractions—races and rides and boat trips and tiny railways. There was a carousel imported from France and a Ferris wheel from one of the international exhibitions in Germany. There were towers and spires and thousands of incandescent lights, so bright that at night, you could see the park from a ship’s deck on the ocean.

“Emile hired hundreds of workers, municipal workers and carnival workers and foreign workers. He brought in animals and acrobats and clowns. The entrance was the last thing finished, and it was truly grand. Everyone said so. When it was complete, he took me there with a cloth blindfold over my eyes. When he removed the blindfold, I saw it.”

The old woman took a step back from Eddie. She looked at him curiously, as if she were disappointed.

“The entrance?” she said. “Don’t you remember? Didn’t you ever wonder about the name? Where you worked? Where your father worked?”

She touched her chest softly with her white-gloved fingers. Then she dipped, as if formally introducing herself.

“I,” she said, “am Ruby.”

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

He is 33. He wakes with a jolt, gasping for breath. His thick, black hair is matted with sweat. He blinks hard against the darkness, trying desperately to focus on his arm, his knuckles, anything to know that he is here, in the apartment over the bakery, and not back in the war, in the village, in the fire. That dream. Will it ever stop?

It is just before 4 A.M. No point in going back to sleep. He waits until his breathing subsides, then slowly rolls off the bed, trying not to wake his wife. He puts his right leg down first, out of habit, avoiding the inevitable stiffness of his left. Eddie begins every morning the same way. One step and one hobble.

In the bathroom, he checks his bloodshot eyes and splashes water on his face. It is always the same dream: Eddie wandering through the flames in the Philippines on his last night of war. The village huts are engulfed in fire, and there is a constant, high-pitched squealing noise. Something invisible hits Eddie's legs and he swats at it but misses, and then swats again and misses again. The flames grow more intense, roaring like an engine, and then Smitty appears, yelling for Eddie, yelling, "Come on! Come on!" Eddie tries to speak but when he opens his mouth, the high-pitched squeal emerges from his throat. Then something grabs his legs, pulling him under the muddy earth.

And then he wakes up. Sweating. Panting. Always the same. The worst part is not the sleeplessness. The worst part is the general darkness the dream leaves over him, a gray film that clouds the day. Even his happy moments feel encased, like holes jabbed in a hard sheet of ice.

He dresses quietly and goes down the stairs. The taxi is parked by the corner, its usual spot, and Eddie wipes the moisture from its windshield. He never speaks about the darkness to Marguerite. She strokes his hair and says, "What's wrong?" and he says, "Nothing, I'm just beat," and leaves it at that. How can he explain such sadness when she is supposed to make him happy? The truth is he cannot explain it himself. All he knows is that something stepped in front of him, blocking his way, until in time he gave up on things, he gave up studying engineering and he gave up on the idea of traveling. He sat down in his life. And there he remained.

This night, when Eddie returns from work, he parks the taxi by the corner. He comes slowly up the stairs. From his apartment, he hears music, a familiar song.

"You made me love you
I didn't want to do it,
I didn't want to do it. . . ."

He opens the door to see a cake on the table and a small white bag, tied with ribbon.

*"Honey?" Marguerite yells from the bedroom. "Is that you?"
He lifts the white bag. Taffy. From the pier.*

“Happy birthday to you . . .” Marguerite emerges, singing in her soft sweet voice. She looks beautiful, wearing the print dress Eddie likes, her hair and lips done up. Eddie feels the need to inhale, as if undeserving of such a moment. He fights the darkness within him, “Leave me alone,” he tells it. “Let me feel this the way I should feel it.”

Marguerite finishes the song and kisses him on the lips.

“Want to fight me for the taffy?” she whispers.

He moves to kiss her again. Someone raps on the door.

“Eddie! Are you in there? Eddie?”

Mr. Nathanson, the baker, lives in the ground-level apartment behind the store. He has a telephone. When Eddie opens the door, he is standing in the doorway, wearing a bathrobe. He looks concerned.

“Eddie,” he says. “Come down. There’s a phone call. I think something happened to your father.”



∞“I AM RUBY.”

It suddenly made sense to Eddie, why the woman looked familiar. He had seen a photograph, somewhere in the back of the repair shop, among the old manuals and paperwork from the park's initial ownership.

“The old entrance . . .” Eddie said.

She nodded in satisfaction. The original Ruby Pier entrance had been something of a landmark, a giant arching structure based on a historic French temple, with fluted columns and a coved dome at the top. Just beneath that dome, under which all patrons would pass, was the painted face of a beautiful woman. This woman. Ruby.

“But that thing was destroyed a long time ago,” Eddie said. “There was a big . . .”

He paused.

“Fire,” the old woman said. “Yes. A very big fire.” She dropped her chin, and her eyes looked down through her spectacles, as if she were reading from her lap.

“It was Independence Day, the Fourth of July—a holiday. Emile loved holidays. ‘Good for business,’ he’d say. If Independence Day went well, the entire summer might go well. So Emile arranged for fireworks. He brought in a

marching band. He even hired extra workers, roustabouts mostly, just for that weekend.

“But something happened the night before the celebration. It was hot, even after the sun went down, and a few of the roustabouts chose to sleep outside, behind the work sheds. They lit a fire in a metal barrel to roast their food.

“As the night went on, there was drinking and carousing. The workers got ahold of some of the smaller fireworks. They set them off. The wind blew. The sparks flew. Everything in those days was made of lathe and tar. . . .”

She shook her head. “The rest happened quickly. The fire spread to the midway and the food stalls and on to the animal cages. The roustabouts ran off. By the time someone came to our home to wake us, Ruby Pier was in flames. From our window we saw the horrible orange blaze. We heard the horses’ hooves and the steamer engines of the fire companies. People were in the street.

“I begged Emile not to go, but that was fruitless. Of course he would go. He would go to the raging fire and he would try to salvage his years of work and he would lose himself in anger and fear and when the entrance caught fire, the entrance with my name and my picture, he lost all sense of where he was, too. He was trying to throw buckets of water when a column collapsed upon him.”

She put her fingers together and raised them to her

lips. "In the course of one night, our lives were changed forever. Risk taker that he was, Emile had acquired only minimal insurance on the pier. He lost his fortune. His splendid gift to me was gone.

"In desperation, he sold the charred grounds to a businessman from Pennsylvania for far less than it was worth. That businessman kept the name, Ruby Pier, and in time, he reopened the park. But it was not ours anymore.

"Emile's spirit was as broken as his body. It took three years before he could walk on his own. We moved away, to a place outside the city, a small flat, where our lives were spent modestly, me tending to my wounded husband and silently nurturing a single wish."

She stopped.

"What wish?" Eddie said.

"That he had never built that place."

☺THE OLD WOMAN sat in silence. Eddie studied the vast jade sky. He thought about how many times he had wished this same thing, that whoever had built Ruby Pier had done something else with his money.

"I'm sorry about your husband," Eddie said, mostly because he didn't know what else to say.

The old woman smiled. "Thank you, dear. But we lived many years beyond those flames. We raised three children. Emile was sickly, in and out of the hospital. He left me a

widow in my fifties. You see this face, these wrinkles?" She turned her cheeks upward. "I earned every one of them."

Eddie frowned. "I don't understand. Did we ever . . . meet? Did you ever come to the pier?"

"No," she said. "I never wanted to see the pier again. My children went there, and their children and theirs. But not me. My idea of heaven was as far from the ocean as possible, back in that busy diner, when my days were simple, when Emile was courting me."

Eddie rubbed his temples. When he breathed, mist emerged.

"So why am *I* here?" he said. "I mean, your story, the fire, it all happened before I was born."

"Things that happen before you are born still affect you," she said. "And people who come before your time affect you as well."

"We move through places every day that would never have been if not for those who came before us. Our workplaces, where we spend so much time—we often think they began with our arrival. That's not true."

She tapped her fingertips together. "If not for Emile, I would have no husband. If not for our marriage, there would be no pier. If there'd been no pier, you would not have ended up working there."

Eddie scratched his head. "So you're here to tell me about work?"

"No, dear," Ruby answered, her voice softening. "I'm here to tell you why your father died."

☉THE PHONE CALL was from Eddie's mother. His father had collapsed that afternoon, on the east end of the boardwalk near the Junior Rocket Ride. He had a raging fever.

"Eddie, I'm afraid," his mother said, her voice shaking. She told him of a night, earlier in the week, when his father had come home at dawn, soaking wet. His clothes were full of sand. He was missing a shoe. She said he smelled like the ocean. Eddie bet he smelled like liquor, too.

"He was coughing," his mother explained. "It just got worse. We should have called a doctor right away. . . ." She drifted in her words. He'd gone to work that day, she said, sick as he was, with his tool belt and his ball peen hammer—same as always—but that night he'd refused to eat and in bed he'd hacked and wheezed and sweated through his undershirt. The next day was worse. And now, this afternoon, he'd collapsed.

"The doctor said it's pneumonia. Oh, I should have done something. I should have *done* something. . . ."

"What were *you* supposed to do?" Eddie asked. He was mad that she took this on herself. It was his father's drunken fault.

Through the phone, he heard her crying.

☉ EDDIE'S FATHER USED to say he'd spent so many years by the ocean, he breathed seawater. Now, away from that ocean, in the confines of a hospital bed, his body began to wither like a beached fish. Complications developed. Congestion built in his chest. His condition went from fair to stable and from stable to serious. Friends went from saying, "He'll be home in a day," to "He'll be home in a week." In his father's absence, Eddie helped out at the pier, working evenings after his taxi job, greasing the tracks, checking the brake pads, testing the levers, even repairing broken ride parts in the shop.

What he really was doing was protecting his father's job. The owners acknowledged his efforts, then paid him half of what his father earned. He gave the money to his mother, who went to the hospital every day and slept there most nights. Eddie and Marguerite cleaned her apartment and shopped for her food.

When Eddie was a teenager, if he ever complained or seemed bored with the pier, his father would snap, "What? This ain't good enough for you?" And later, when he'd suggested Eddie take a job there after high school, Eddie almost laughed, and his father again said, "What? This ain't good enough for you?" And before Eddie went to war, when he'd talked of marrying Marguerite and becoming an engineer, his father said, "What? This ain't good enough for you?"

And now, despite all that, here he was, at the pier, doing his father's labor.

Finally, one night, at his mother's urging, Eddie visited the hospital. He entered the room slowly. His father, who for years had refused to speak to Eddie, now lacked the strength to even try. He watched his son with heavy-lidded eyes. Eddie, after struggling to find even one sentence to say, did the only thing he could think of to do: He held up his hands and showed his father his grease-stained fingertips.

"Don't sweat it, kid," the other maintenance workers told him. "Your old man will pull through. He's the toughest son of a gun we've ever seen."

☉ PARENTS RARELY LET go of their children, so children let go of them. They move on. They move away. The moments that used to define them—a mother's approval, a father's nod—are covered by moments of their own accomplishments. It is not until much later, as the skin sags and the heart weakens, that children understand; their stories, and all their accomplishments, sit atop the stories of their mothers and fathers, stones upon stones, beneath the waters of their lives.

When the news came that his father had died—"slipped away," a nurse told him, as if he had gone out for milk—Eddie felt the emptiest kind of anger, the kind that circles in its cage. Like most workingmen's sons, Eddie had envisioned for his father a heroic death to counter the common-

ness of his life. There was nothing heroic about a drunken stupor by the beach.

The next day, he went to his parents' apartment, entered their bedroom, and opened all the drawers, as if he might find a piece of his father inside. He rifled through coins, a tie pin, a small bottle of apple brandy, rubber bands, electric bills, pens, and a cigarette lighter with a mermaid on the side. Finally, he found a deck of playing cards. He put it in his pocket.

☉THE FUNERAL WAS small and brief. In the weeks that followed, Eddie's mother lived in a daze. She spoke to her husband as if he were still there. She yelled at him to turn down the radio. She cooked enough food for two. She fluffed pillows on both sides of the bed, even though only one side had been slept in.

One night, Eddie saw her stacking dishes on the countertop.

"Let me help you," he said.

"No, no," his mother answered, "your father will put them away."

Eddie put a hand on her shoulder.

"Ma," he said, softly. "Dad's gone."

"Gone where?"

The next day, Eddie went to the dispatcher and told him he was quitting. Two weeks later, he and Marguerite moved back into the building where Eddie had grown up,

Beachwood Avenue—apartment 6B—where the hallways were narrow and the kitchen window viewed the carousel and where Eddie had accepted a job that would let him keep an eye on his mother, a position he had been groomed for summer after summer: a maintenance man at Ruby Pier. Eddie never said this—not to his wife, not to his mother, not to anyone—but he cursed his father for dying and for trapping him in the very life he'd been trying to escape; a life that, as he heard the old man laughing from the grave, apparently now was good enough for him.

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

He is 37. His breakfast is getting cold.

"You see any salt?" Eddie asks Noel.

Noel, chewing a mouthful of sausage, slides out from the booth, leans across another table, and grabs a salt shaker.

"Here," he mumbles. "Happy birthday."

Eddie shakes it hard. "How tough is it to keep salt on the table?"

"What are you, the manager?" Noel says.

Eddie shrugs. The morning is already hot and thick with humidity. This is their routine: breakfast, once a week, Saturday mornings, before the park gets crazy. Noel works in the dry cleaning business. Eddie helped him get the contract for Ruby Pier's maintenance uniforms.

"What'dya think of this good-lookin' guy?" Noel says. He has a copy of Life magazine open to a photo of a young political candidate. "How can this guy run for president? He's a kid!"

Eddie shrugs. "He's about our age."

"No foolin'?" Noel says. He lifts an eyebrow. "I thought you had to be older to be president."

"We are older," Eddie mumbles.

Noel closes the magazine. His voice drops. "Hey. You hear what happened at Brighton?"

Eddie nods. He sips his coffee. He'd heard. An amusement park. A gondola ride. Something snapped. A mother and her son fell 60 feet to their death.

"You know anybody up there?" Noel asks.

Eddie puts his tongue between his teeth. Every now and then he hears these stories, an accident at a park somewhere, and he shudders as if a wasp just flew by his ear. Not a day passes that he doesn't worry about it happening here, at Ruby Pier, under his watch.

"Nuh-uh," he says. "I don't know no one in Brighton."

He fixes his eyes out the window, as a crowd of beachgoers emerges from the train station. They carry towels, umbrellas, wicker baskets with sandwiches wrapped in paper. Some even have the newest thing: foldable chairs, made from lightweight aluminum.

An old man walks past in a panama hat, smoking a cigar.

"Lookit that guy," Eddie says. "I promise you, he'll drop that cigar on the boardwalk."

"Yeah?" Noel says. "So?"

"It falls in the cracks, then it starts to burn. You can smell it. The chemical they put on the wood. It starts smoking right away. Yesterday I grabbed a kid, couldn't have been more than four years old, about to put a cigar butt in his mouth."

Noel makes a face. "And?"

Eddie turns aside. "And nothing. People should be more careful, that's all."

Noel shovels a forkful of sausage into his mouth. "You're a barrel of laughs. You always this much fun on your birthday?"

Eddie doesn't answer. The old darkness has taken a seat alongside him. He is used to it by now, making room for it the way you make room for a commuter on a crowded bus.

He thinks about the maintenance load today. Broken mirror in the Fun House. New fenders for the bumper cars. Glue, he reminds himself, gotta order more glue. He thinks about those poor people in Brighton. He wonders who's in charge up there.

"What time you finish today?" Noel asks.

Eddie exhales. "It's gonna be busy. Summer. Saturday. You know."

Noel lifts an eyebrow. "We can make the track by six."

Eddie thinks about Marguerite. He always thinks about Marguerite when Noel mentions the horse track.

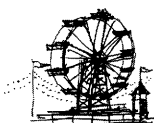
"Come on. It's your birthday," Noel says.

Eddie pokes a fork at his eggs, now too cold to bother with.

"All right," he says.



The Third Lesson



“*W*AS THE PIER SO BAD?” THE OLD woman asked.

“It wasn’t my choice,” Eddie said, sighing. “My mother needed help. One thing led to another. Years passed. I never left. I never lived nowhere else. Never made any real money. You know how it is—you get used to something, people rely on you, one day you wake up and you can’t tell Tuesday from Thursday. You’re doing the same boring stuff, you’re a ‘ride man,’ just like . . .”

“Your father?”

Eddie said nothing.

“He was hard on you,” the old woman said.

Eddie lowered his eyes. “Yeah. So?”

“Perhaps you were hard on him, too.”

“I doubt it. You know the last time he talked to me?”

"The last time he tried to strike you."

Eddie shot her a look.

"And you know the last thing he said to me? 'Get a job.' Some father, huh?"

The old woman pursed her lips. "You began to work after that. You picked yourself up."

Eddie felt a rumbling of anger. "Look," he snapped. "You didn't know the guy."

"That's true." She rose. "But I know something you don't. And it is time to show you."

☉RUBY POINTED WITH the tip of her parasol and drew a circle in the snow. When Eddie looked into the circle, he felt as if his eyes were falling from their sockets and traveling on their own, down a hole and into another moment. The images sharpened. It was years ago, in the old apartment. He could see front and back, above and below.

This is what he saw:

He saw his mother, looking concerned, sitting at the kitchen table. He saw Mickey Shea, sitting across from her. Mickey looked awful. He was soaking wet, and he kept rubbing his hands over his forehead and down his nose. He began to sob. Eddie's mother brought him a glass of water. She motioned for him to wait, and walked to the bedroom and shut the door. She took off her shoes and her house-dress. She reached for a blouse and skirt.

Eddie could see all the rooms, but he could not hear

what the two of them were saying, it was just blurred noise. He saw Mickey, in the kitchen, ignoring the glass of water, pulling a flask from his jacket and swigging from it. Then, slowly, he got up and staggered to the bedroom. He opened the door.

Eddie saw his mother, half dressed, turn in surprise. Mickey was wobbling. She pulled a robe around her. Mickey came closer. Her hand went out instinctively to block him. Mickey froze, just for an instant, then grabbed that hand and grabbed Eddie's mother and backed her into the wall, leaning against her, grabbing her waist. She squirmed, then yelled, and pushed on Mickey's chest while still gripping her robe. He was bigger and stronger, and he buried his unshaven face below her cheek, smearing tears on her neck.

Then the front door opened and Eddie's father stood there, wet from rain, a ball peen hammer hanging from his belt. He ran into the bedroom and saw Mickey grabbing his wife. Eddie's father hollered. He raised the hammer. Mickey put his hands over his head and charged to the door, knocking Eddie's father sideways. Eddie's mother was crying, her chest heaving, her face streamed with tears. Her husband grabbed her shoulders. He shook her violently. Her robe fell. They were both screaming. Then Eddie's father left the apartment, smashing a lamp with the hammer on his way out. He thumped down the steps and ran off into the rainy night.

“WHAT WAS THAT?” Eddie yelled in disbelief. “What the hell was *THAT*?”

The old woman held her tongue. She stepped to the side of the snowy circle and drew another one. Eddie tried not to look down. He couldn't help it. He was falling again, becoming eyes at a scene.

This is what he saw:

He saw a rainstorm at the farthest edge of Ruby Pier—the “north point,” they called it—a narrow jetty that stretched far out into the ocean. The sky was a bluish black. The rain was falling in sheets. Mickey Shea came stumbling toward the edge of the jetty. He fell to the ground, his stomach heaving in and out. He lay there for a moment, face to the darkened sky, then rolled on his side, under the wood railing. He dropped into the sea.

Eddie's father appeared moments later, scrambling back and forth, the hammer still in his hand. He grabbed the railing, searching the waters. The wind blew the rain in sideways. His clothes were drenched and his leather tool belt was nearly black from the soaking. He saw something in the waves. He stopped, pulled off the belt, yanked off one shoe, tried to undo the other, gave up, squatted under the railing and jumped, splashing clumsily in the churning ocean.

Mickey was bobbing in the insistent roll of seawater, half unconscious, a foamy yellow fluid coming from his mouth. Eddie's father swam to him, yelling into the wind.

He grabbed Mickey. Mickey swung. Eddie's father swung back. The skies clapped with thunder as the rainwater pelted them. They grabbed and flailed in the violent chop.

Mickey coughed hard as Eddie's father grabbed his arm and hooked it over his shoulder. He went under, came up again, then braced his weight against Mickey's body, pointing them toward shore. He kicked. They moved forward. A wave swept them back. Then forward again. The ocean thumped and crashed, but Eddie's father remained wedged under Mickey's armpit, pumping his legs, blinking wildly to clear his vision.

They caught the crest of a wave and made sudden progress shoreward. Mickey moaned and gasped. Eddie's father spit out seawater. It seemed to take forever, the rain popping, the white foam smacking their faces, the two men grunting, thrashing their arms. Finally, a high, curling wave lifted them up and dumped them onto the sand, and Eddie's father rolled out from under Mickey and was able to hook his hands under Mickey's arms and hold him from being swept into the surf. When the waves receded, he yanked Mickey forward with a final surge, then collapsed on the shore, his mouth open, filling with wet sand.

☉ EDDIE'S VISION RETURNED to his body. He felt exhausted, spent, as if he had been in that ocean himself. His head was heavy. Everything he thought he'd known about his father, he didn't seem to know anymore.

"What was he *doing*?" Eddie whispered.

"Saving a friend," Ruby said.

Eddie glared at her. "Some friend. If I'd have known what he did, I'd have let his drunken hide drown."

"Your father thought about that, too," the old woman said. "He had chased after Mickey to hurt him, perhaps even to kill him. But in the end, he couldn't. He knew who Mickey was. He knew his shortcomings. He knew he drank. He knew his judgment faltered.

"But many years earlier, when your father was looking for work, it was Mickey who went to the pier owner and vouched for him. And when you were born, it was Mickey who lent your parents what little money he had, to help pay for the extra mouth to feed. Your father took old friendships seriously—"

"Hold on, lady," Eddie snapped. "Did you see what that bastard was doing with my mother?"

"I did," the old woman said sadly. "It was wrong. But things are not always what they seem.

"Mickey had been fired that afternoon. He'd slept through another shift, too drunk to wake up, and his employers told him that was enough. He handled the news as he handled all bad news, by drinking more, and he was thick with whiskey by the time he reached your mother. He was begging for help. He wanted his job back. Your father was working late. Your mother was going to take Mickey to him.

"Mickey was coarse, but he was not evil. At that mo-

ment, he was lost, adrift, and what he did was an act of loneliness and desperation. He acted on impulse. A bad impulse. Your father acted on impulse, too, and while his first impulse was to kill, his final impulse was to keep a man alive."

She crossed her hands over the end of her parasol.

"That was how he took ill, of course. He lay there on the beach for hours, soaking and exhausted, before he had the strength to struggle home. Your father was no longer a young man. He was already in his fifties."

"Fifty-six," Eddie said blankly.

"Fifty-six," the old woman repeated. "His body had been weakened, the ocean had left him vulnerable, pneumonia took hold of him, and in time, he died."

"Because of Mickey?" Eddie said.

"Because of loyalty," she said.

"People don't die because of loyalty."

"They don't?" She smiled. "Religion? Government? Are we not loyal to such things, sometimes to the death?"

Eddie shrugged.

"Better," she said, "to be loyal to one another."

☞AFTER THAT, THE two of them remained in the snowy mountain valley for a long time. At least to Eddie it felt long. He wasn't sure how long things took anymore.

"What happened to Mickey Shea?" Eddie said.

"He died, alone, a few years later," the old woman said.

"Drank his way to the grave. He never forgave himself for what happened."

"But my old man," Eddie said, rubbing his forehead. "He never said anything."

"He never spoke of that night again, not to your mother, not to anyone else. He was ashamed for her, for Mickey, for himself. In the hospital, he stopped speaking altogether. Silence was his escape, but silence is rarely a refuge. His thoughts still haunted him.

"One night his breathing slowed and his eyes closed and he could not be awakened. The doctors said he had fallen into a coma."

Eddie remembered that night. Another phone call to Mr. Nathanson. Another knock on his door.

"After that, your mother stayed by his bedside. Days and nights. She would moan to herself, softly, as if she were praying: 'I should have done something. I should have done something. . . .'

"Finally, one night, at the doctors' urging, she went home to sleep. Early the next morning, a nurse found your father slumped halfway out the window."

"Wait," Eddie said. His eyes narrowed. "The window?"

Ruby nodded. "Sometime during the night, your father awakened. He rose from his bed, staggered across the room, and found the strength to raise the window sash. He called your mother's name with what little voice he had, and he called yours, too, and your brother, Joe. And he called for

Mickey. At that moment, it seemed, his heart was spilling out, all the guilt and regret. Perhaps he felt the light of death approaching. Perhaps he only knew you were all out there somewhere, in the streets beneath his window. He bent over the ledge. The night was chilly. The wind and damp, in his state, were too much. He was dead before dawn.

“The nurses who found him dragged him back to his bed. They were frightened for their jobs, so they never breathed a word. The story was he died in his sleep.”

Eddie fell back, stunned. He thought about that final image. His father, the tough old war horse, trying to crawl out a window. Where was he going? What was he thinking? Which was worse when left unexplained: a life, or a death?

☉ “HOW DO YOU know all this?” Eddie asked Ruby.

She sighed. “Your father lacked the money for a hospital room of his own. So did the man on the other side of the curtain.”

She paused.

“Emile. My husband.”

Eddie lifted his eyes. His head moved back as if he'd just solved a puzzle.

“Then you *saw* my father.”

“Yes.”

“And my mother.”

“I heard her moaning on those lonely nights. We never

spoke. But after your father's death, I inquired about your family. When I learned where he had worked, I felt a stinging pain, as if I had lost a loved one myself. The pier that bore my name. I felt its cursed shadow, and I wished again that it had never been built.

"That wish followed me to heaven, even as I waited for you."

Eddie looked confused.

"The diner?" she said. She pointed to the speck of light in the mountains. "It's there because I wanted to return to my younger years, a simple but secure life. And I wanted all those who had ever suffered at Ruby Pier—every accident, every fire, every fight, slip, and fall—to be safe and secure. I wanted them all like I wanted my Emile, warm, well fed, in the cradle of a welcoming place, far from the sea."

Ruby stood, and Eddie stood, too. He could not stop thinking about his father's death.

"I hated him," he mumbled.

The old woman nodded.

"He was hell on me as a kid. And he was worse when I got older."

Ruby stepped toward him. "Edward," she said softly. It was the first time she had called him by name. "Learn this from me. Holding anger is a poison. It eats you from inside. We think that hating is a weapon that attacks the person who harmed us. But hatred is a curved blade. And the harm we do, we do to ourselves.

"Forgive, Edward. Forgive. Do you remember the lightness you felt when you first arrived in heaven?"

Eddie did. *Where is my pain?*

"That's because no one is born with anger. And when we die, the soul is freed of it. But now, here, in order to move on, you must understand why you felt what you did, and why you no longer need to feel it."

She touched his hand.

"You need to forgive your father."

∞ EDDIE THOUGHT ABOUT the years that followed his father's funeral. How he never achieved anything, how he never went anywhere. For all that time, Eddie had imagined a certain life—a "could have been" life—that would have been his if not for his father's death and his mother's subsequent collapse. Over the years, he glorified that imaginary life and held his father accountable for all of its losses: the loss of freedom, the loss of career, the loss of hope. He never rose above the dirty, tiresome work his father had left behind.

"When he died," Eddie said, "he took part of me with him. I was stuck after that."

Ruby shook her head. "Your father is not the reason you never left the pier."

Eddie looked up. "Then what is?"

She patted her skirt. She adjusted her spectacles. She began to walk away. "There are still two people for you to meet," she said.

Eddie tried to say "Wait," but a cold wind nearly ripped the voice from his throat. Then everything went black.

☉RUBY WAS GONE. He was back atop the mountain, outside the diner, standing in the snow.

He stood there for a long time, alone in the silence, until he realized the old woman was not coming back. Then he turned to the door and slowly pulled it open. He heard clanking silverware and dishes being stacked. He smelled freshly cooked food—breads and meats and sauces. The spirits of those who had perished at the pier were all around, engaged with one another, eating and drinking and talking.

Eddie moved haltingly, knowing what he was there to do. He turned to his right, to the corner booth, to the ghost of his father, smoking a cigar. He felt a shiver. He thought about the old man hanging out that hospital window, dying alone in the middle of the night.

"Dad?" Eddie whispered.

His father could not hear him. Eddie drew closer. "Dad. I know what happened now."

He felt a choke in his chest. He dropped to his knees alongside the booth. His father was so close that Eddie could see the whiskers on his face and the frayed end of his cigar. He saw the baggy lines beneath his tired eyes, the bent nose, the bony knuckles and squared shoulders of a workingman. He looked at his own arms and realized, in

his earthly body, he was now older than his father. He had outlived him in every way.

“I was angry with you, Dad. I hated you.”

Eddie felt tears welling. He felt a shaking in his chest. Something was flushing out of him.

“You beat me. You shut me out. I didn’t understand. I still don’t understand. Why did you do it? Why?” He drew in long painful breaths. “I didn’t know, OK? I didn’t know your life, what happened. I didn’t *know* you. But you’re my father. I’ll let it go now, all right? All right? Can we let it go?”

His voice wobbled until it was high and wailing, not his own anymore. “OK? YOU HEAR ME?” he screamed. Then softer: “You hear me? Dad?”

He leaned in close. He saw his father’s dirty hands. He spoke the last familiar words in a whisper.

“It’s fixed.”

Eddie pounded the table, then slumped to the floor. When he looked up, he saw Ruby standing across the way, young and beautiful. She dipped her head, opened the door, and lifted off into the jade sky.

THURSDAY, 11 A.M.

Who would pay for Eddie's funeral? He had no relatives. He'd left no instructions. His body remained at the city morgue, as did his clothes and personal effects, his maintenance shirt, his socks and shoes, his linen cap, his wedding ring, his cigarettes and pipe cleaners, all awaiting claim.

In the end, Mr. Bullock, the park owner, footed the bill, using the money he saved from Eddie's no-longer-cashable paycheck. The casket was a wooden box. The church was chosen by location—the one nearest the pier—as most attendees had to get back to work.

A few minutes before the service, the pastor asked Dominguez, wearing a navy blue sport coat and his good black jeans, to step inside his office.

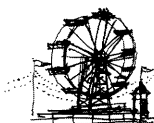
"Could you share some of the deceased's unique qualities?" the pastor asked. "I understand you worked with him."

Dominguez swallowed. He was none too comfortable with clergymen. He hooked his fingers together earnestly, as if giving the matter some thought, and spoke as softly as he thought one should speak in such a situation.

"Eddie," he finally said, "really loved his wife."

He unhooked his fingers, then quickly added, "Of course, I never met her."

The Fourth Person Eddie Meets in Heaven



*E*DDIE BLINKED, AND FOUND HIMSELF IN A small, round room. The mountains were gone and so was the jade sky. A low plaster ceiling just missed his head. The room was brown—as plain as shipping wrap—and empty, save for a wooden stool and an oval mirror on the wall.

Eddie stepped in front of the mirror. He cast no reflection. He saw only the reverse of the room, which expanded suddenly to include a row of doors. Eddie turned around.

Then he coughed.

The sound startled him, as if it came from someone else. He coughed again, a hard, rumbling cough, as if things needed to be resettled in his chest.

When did *this* start? Eddie thought. He touched his skin, which had aged since his time with Ruby. It felt thin-

ner now, and drier. His midsection, which during his time with the Captain had felt tight as pulled rubber, was loose with flab, the droop of age.

There are still two people for you to meet, Ruby had said. And then what? His lower back had a dull ache. His bad leg was growing stiffer. He realized what was happening, it happened with each new stage of heaven. He was rotting away.

HE APPROACHED ONE of the doors and pushed it open. Suddenly, he was outside, in the yard of a home he had never seen, in a land that he did not recognize, in the midst of what appeared to be a wedding reception. Guests holding silver plates filled the grassy lawn. At one end stood an archway covered in red flowers and birch branches, and at the other end, next to Eddie, stood the door that he had walked through. The bride, young and pretty, was in the center of the group, removing a pin from her butter-colored hair. The groom was lanky. He wore a black wedding coat and held up a sword, and at the hilt of the sword was a ring. He lowered it toward the bride and guests cheered as she took it. Eddie heard their voices, but the language was foreign. German? Swedish?

He coughed again. The group looked up. Every person seemed to smile, and the smiling frightened Eddie. He backed quickly through the door from which he'd entered, figuring to return to the round room. Instead, he was in the middle of another wedding, indoors this time, in a large hall,

where the people looked Spanish and the bride wore orange blossoms in her hair. She was dancing from one partner to the next, and each guest handed her a small sack of coins.

Eddie coughed again—he couldn't help it—and when several of the guests looked up, he backed through the door and again entered a different wedding scene, something African, Eddie guessed, where families poured wine onto the ground and the couple held hands and jumped over a broom. Then another pass through the door to a Chinese reception, where firecrackers were lit before cheering attendees, then another doorway to something else—maybe French?—where the couple drank together from a two-handled cup.

How long does this go on? Eddie thought. In each reception, there were no signs of how the people had gotten there, no cars or buses, no wagons, no horses. Departure did not appear to be an issue. The guests milled about, and Eddie was absorbed as one of them, smiled at but never spoken to, much like the handful of weddings he had gone to on earth. He preferred it that way. Weddings were, in Eddie's mind, too full of embarrassing moments, like when couples were asked to join in a dance, or to help lift the bride in a chair. His bad leg seemed to glow at those moments, and he felt as if people could see it from across the room.

Because of that, Eddie avoided most receptions, and when he did go, he often stood in the parking lot, smoking a cigarette, waiting for time to pass. For a long stretch, there were no weddings to attend, anyhow. Only in the late

years of his life, when some of his teenaged pier workers had grown up and taken spouses, did he find himself getting the faded suit out of the closet and putting on the collared shirt that pinched his thick neck. By this point, his once-fractured leg bones were spurred and deformed. Arthritis had invaded his knee. He limped badly and was thus excused from all participatory moments, such as dances or candle lightings. He was considered an "old man," alone, unattached, and no one expected him to do much besides smile when the photographer came to the table.

Here, now, in his maintenance clothes, he moved from one wedding to the next, one reception to another, one language, one cake, and one type of music to another language, another cake, and another type of music. The uniformity did not surprise Eddie. He always figured a wedding here was not much different from a wedding there. What he didn't get was what this had to do with *him*.

He pushed through the threshold one more time and found himself in what appeared to be an Italian village. There were vineyards on the hillsides and farmhouses of travertine stone. Many of the men had thick, black hair, combed back and wet, and the women had dark eyes and sharp features. Eddie found a place against a wall and watched the bride and groom cut a log in half with a two-handed rip saw. Music played—flutists, violinists, guitarists—and guests began the tarantella, dancing in a wild, twirling

rhythm. Eddie took a few steps back. His eyes wandered to the edge of the crowd.

A bridesmaid in a long lavender dress and a stitched straw hat moved through the guests, with a basket of candy-covered almonds. From afar, she looked to be in her 20s.

“Per l’amaro e il dolce?” she said, offering her sweets. *“Per l’amaro e il dolce? . . . Per l’amaro e il dolce? . . .”*

At the sound of her voice, Eddie’s whole body shook. He began to sweat. Something told him to run, but something else froze his feet to the ground. She came his way. Her eyes found him from beneath the hat brim, which was topped with parchment flowers.

“Per l’amaro e il dolce?” she said, smiling, holding out the almonds. *“For the bitter and the sweet?”*

Her dark hair fell over one eye and Eddie’s heart nearly burst. His lips took a moment to part, and the sound from the back of his throat took a moment to rise, but they came together in the first letter of the only name that ever made him feel this way. He dropped to his knees.

“Marguerite . . .” he whispered.

“For the bitter and the sweet,” she said.